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Gendering Piety, Justice and Violence: On the Aesthetics of Self-Killing in Han-Chinese, Naxi and Lahu Cultures (from the Late-Ming to Mid-20th Century)

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Abstract Self-killing in late imperial and modern China called into play gender disparities, and secular and religious morals often at odds with each other. Scholarship has long focused on Confucian virtue ethics that led young widows to follow their husband to death, or take a chastity vow and disfigure themselves to avoid rape, but little effort has been made to examine suicide practices cross-culturally. This paper compares such practices among Han women from the southeast coast and indigenous Naxi and Lahu women of upland Yunnan, throwing light on the aesthetics behind their struggles for justice, free-choice marriage and beliefs in posthumous love.

Keywords Suicide. Filiality. Self-inflicted violence. Gender-role distinctions. Afterlife beliefs.

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1 Introduction

Most of current scholarship on female suicide in late imperial China is concerned with secular aspects of the cult of chaste widowhood, like the social legislation, family institutions as well as the Confucian intellectual and political discourses on women's physical ordeals of loyalty towards a departed husband or the Chinese paternalistic state. Although published literature has illuminated how women cultivated Confucian ideals of chastity to the point of taking their lives or resorting to auto-mutilation, and the state in turn employed 'chastity awards' (*jingbiao* 旌表), ordeal stories and 'biographies of women' (*lienü zhuan* 列女傳) as ideological constructs to bolster its presence in the local society,[1] indigenous beliefs about afterlife and religious aspects of China's legal culture of which suicide is expression have received little scholarly attention. Even when these are brought into the discussion, there is a tendency among scholars to invoke symbols of higher authority, such as City Gods (*chenghuang* 城隍), underworld officials and other male deities who occupy a special place in the morally-governed cosmos of Confucian ritualism. Parallel to this trend, an emerging stream of research has also suggested that the late imperial state awarded chaste widow honours to non-Han women in an attempt to normalise its relationship with tribal groups around the Chinese periphery, create a native exemplar of Confucian virtue and eventually impose itself as the source of normative authority in societies that had only lately been integrated into the empire (Theiss 2004, 37-8; Zhu 2020, 89-90, 105-16).[2] Documentary evidence of religious

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1 Elvin (1984) remains by far the definitive work on the evolution of chastity cult. Other influential studies in English include Mann's most cited research paper (1987), and the edited volume by Ropp, Zamperini and Zurndofer (2001). For an overview of the chastity cult in earlier periods of history, see Bossler 2013.

2 Janet M. Theiss (2004) has been one the first to detect that chaste widowhood, among other things, worked as a model of imperial subjecthood. She pointed out that

views on suicide and death-related practices among the non-Han indigenes is scattered but detailed enough to allow for an informed assessment of what were the major differences in suicide patterns prior to and after the introduction of Chinese virtue ethics. The same goes for notions of heroic fidelity that, with regard to some of the Tibeto-Burman (TB) speaking minorities of southwestern China, are fairly well documented and speak of a repertoire of meanings, symbols, and beliefs about suicide that set itself apart from the mainstream Chinese one. Drawing on these assumptions, the paper compares the aesthetics of female suicide in southeastern China and the societies of indigenous Naxi and Lahu in landlocked Yunnan as manifested within and beyond the ritualised moral order of Confucian orthodoxy and patriarchal configurations of power. The aim of such comparison is to unveil the complex interplay between secular politics, ethics, religion, and local sociocultural determinants that devalue certain varieties of suicide while encouraging others.

Scrutinising suicide through the compound prism of gender, ethnicity, and religion offers a unique perspective on lesser-known but longstanding indigenous repertoires of highly ritualised and culturally determined attitudes towards death. Furthermore, it allows greater comprehension of what Marzio Barbagli identifies as the four key aspects to be kept in mind when conducting comparative research on suicide, namely the intentions of those who carry out the act, the significance attributed to it, the methods deployed, as well as the rituals performed before or after death (Barbagli 2015, 7-8). By integrating these aspects into my own analysis of death-related practices in the regional contexts and society(ies) of China, I treat suicide either as (1) a responsive mechanism developed within a more or less cohesive group of people to address identity threats, oppose social change, and pursue alternative justice, or as (2) an embodied expression of conjugal suffering by means of which personal affections are celebrated alongside or in lieu of Confucian standards of morality. Ritual performances and beliefs in the afterlife make the bulk of the analysis. They are explored against the backdrop of women's individual aspirations, conflicting filial obligations, and broader social expectations. Such exploration is to interrogate (1) in what way(s),

since the 1720s the governor-generals of the provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan (Jinchuan 金川) requested special honours for women – including righteous 'barbarian women' (*fanfu* 番婦) in the families of native chiefs (*tusi* 土司) – who had martyred themselves in the face of the Qing campaigns against the Dai, Miao and Gyalrong Tibetan rebels. Through a collection of examples drawn from the Miao albums, Jing Zhu (2020) has also highlighted the centrality of Han-Chinese conventions of sexuality in the representations of non-Han women, adding a new dimension to the intersection of empire with gender and the reproduction of power hierarchies between the state and its indigenous subjects in Ming-Qing China.

if any, this set of practices and beliefs may elevate suicide to an aesthetic level, and (2) whether the martyred female body may accentuate the moral salience of cultural imaginary(ies). A selection of empirical cases spanning the Ming-Qing (1368-1911) and the Republic of China (1912-49) period, with a handful of cases on Maoist China (1949-76), is presented to stimulate debate around these two topical questions. Research data are derived from sources as varied as biographies of women, ethnographies, folktales, travel diaries, myths of origin and cosmographies, love-suicide songs, and other first-hand accounts. The area to which these data refer is the southern half of coastal China and the highlands of western Yunnan bordering continental Southeast Asia. Some cases pertain to other parts of China, and I use also some evidence from northern Taiwan, in the hope that more general conclusions may be made.

The paper is divided into three parts. Part two positions the subject in relation to the theoretical accomplishments of past and recent sinological research. It offers a critical summary of themes and trends in female suicide over the last few centuries of imperial regime up till the first half of the twentieth century. As brought forth in this first background section, while recent work on suicide has deepened understanding of the shifting social, legal and intellectual contexts that gave rise to such controversial phenomenon among the Han-Chinese urban élites of better-off coastal provinces, insufficient effort has been made to explore the intersection of ethnicity, politics and gender in death-related practices, especially when these are performed in less gender-restrictive societies like the predominantly rural Naxi and Lahu ones whose custom of ritual 'love-suicide' (*xunqing* 殉情) ascribed to death different connotations. The third part is a revisionist inquiry into Han-Chinese representations of female suicide that goes through conceptualisations of supernatural justice and vengeance, like the punishment sought by ghosts of aggrieved women and 'indictments against the living' (*yinzhuang* 陰狀) submitted to deities of the judiciary underworld (*mingfu* 冥府).[3] The fourth part examines the cultural repertoires of Naxi and Lahu people, with special attention paid to funerary rites, courtship festivals, group singing-and-dancing, natural sceneries, and music tunes that mould the way people thought

3 I follow Barend ter Haar's usage of the term supernatural "as a shortcut for other realms of being than the conventional human world" (2019, 10 fn. 1), and endorse Paul Katz's wisdom of regarding as an inherent aspect of Chinese judicial culture that "systematic body of concepts or beliefs [pertaining] to the ways in which gods control human affairs in this life and the next, including health, wealth, punishment in the underworld after death, and reincarnation". Katz has coined the neologism "judicial continuum" to describe this quintessentially Chinese body of knowledge about crime that "cover[s] both the official and religious realms, with considerable interaction between the two" (Katz 2008, 3 fn. 8, 21).

about, spoke of and enacted suicide. In these last two parts, without losing sight of the historical context within which local events unfold and the specificity of local sociocultural conditions that shaped suicidal behaviours, lengthy translations of or verbatim passages from ethnographies, poems, and other types of folk literature are provided to allow suicide narratives to speak for themselves. Gender identities are brought to the fore to elucidate how suicide can be a source of empowerment for women, and their body turned into a tool of dissent. The analysis is complemented by my own observations on the beautification of violence – directed at one's self or others – and its ambivalent relationship with Confucian piety. In doing so, the paper will depart from previous surveys of female suicide that conceive of it exclusively as a corporal demonstration of virtue that corroborates the people's respect for Confucian norms and familial obligations.

2 Female Suicide in Historical Perspective. Themes, Trends and Contexts

Suicide in early China was related to political loyalty. From the time of the Warring States (475-221 BCE), it functioned as a blood oath to mark a ruler's absolute authority over his officials, or a servant's devotion to his lord (Lewis 1990, 10-11, 77-8). This quasi-religious custom survived well into later dynastic periods, experienced a resurgence among late-Ming ministers, and was occasionally invoked even by members of the Qing armed forces (McMorran 1994, 49-52).[4] Yet suicide could also imply a person's strongest protest against another. In this latter sense, it was enforced as a punishment or expedient to obtain revenge, exemplifying what Bronislaw Malinowski called "an act of justice […] performed […] not upon oneself, but upon a near kindred who has caused offence" (Malinowski 1916, 360). Such self-destructive acts usually arose from a prolonged quarrel and were carried out by the wronged party who, resenting a false accusation, charge, or unfair treatment, terminated his or her existence so as to bring the quarrel before a magistrate and implicate the offender. His or her prime motivation was vengeance, and this might be expressed with a statement of grievances that gives voice to personal injustices, and blames or even curses someone for what has occurred, and thereby requests the authorities to hold that someone to account.[5]

4 Compare the case of a Manchu bannerman who, out of gratitude towards his departed teacher, harboured the idea of killing himself so that he could serve him in the afterworld (Bodde, Morris 1967, 166, 440-1, 531).

5 An article from the *Peking Gazette*, dated 19 June 1872, gives a hint of how vengeful feelings are unleashed by an ill-treated family of four persons who decided to jump into a well to get back at a relative for cheating their patrimony (Gray 1878, 332-4).

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Although the practice of suicide itself is by no means gender-specific, suicide or even the threat thereof came to be associated with women. Because of Chinese society's patriarchal order and Confucian standards of familial and sexual morality,[6] suicide could be for women a means of escape from and protection against subjugation. In this way, suicide became an opportunity for women to exercise their agency. But adult males also committed suicide, and cases of suicide because of parental or spousal conflict were not a rarity in the judicial compendia and penal codes of Ming and Qing dynasties. Unfilial conduct leading to a parent or grandparent's suicide was a matter of utmost concern, and accusing and cursing one's (grand)-parents or failing to provide for them ranked high in the gravity of crimes under the most abhorrent "Ten Abominations" (*shi e* 十惡) (Jiang 2005, 18, artt. 352, 361; Jones 1994, 35, 312, art. 329). Some statutes even prescribed exile and immediate strangulation or beheading to the offspring whose "moral turpitude" (i.e. illicit sex) or predilection for theft induced a family elder to kill himself or herself.[7] Yet, the parents-in-law who hounded a widow to death to seize her property would likely escape criminal prosecution for, whatever the true cause of death, they could conceal their misconduct by declaring her suicide a virtuous display of filial piety or wifely fidelity (Hinsch 2016, 167-8).[8] Those most severely punished for family misconduct were young and powerless women – the law imposed the death penalty on a licentious daughter, either married (*fu* 婦) or unmarried (*nü* 女), but not on a son, for whom the magistrate offered a commuted sentence (Bernhardt 1996, 53; Bodde, Morris 1967, 359-62, 515-16). By the same token, should

6 I use the term 'patriarchal order' rather than 'patriarchy' to signify not simply masculine dominance but a particular social condition by which female family members of senior generations are endowed with authority over male and female members of junior or subaltern classes, like housemaids and concubines. In so doing, I follow Stevan Harrell's example of acknowledging "the active participation of older women as dominators" in Chinese patriarchy (2013, 83 fn. 18).

7 Statt. 1326 "suicide causé par la contrainte" (*weibi ren zhi si* 威逼人致死) and 1504-1506 "désobéissance aux parents et grands-parents" (*zisun weifan jiaoling* 子孫違犯教令), in Boulais 1966, 578, 648-9. In his study of the law of homicide, Geoffrey MacCormack also determines that (1) "any child who had acted in such a way as to cause a father in a fit of anger to commit suicide, no matter how trivial the cause, was to be sentenced to death"; (2) the same "treatment [was applicable to] a wife to whom responsibility for her husband's suicide could be attributed" (MacCormack 1996, 65, 93).

8 In like manner, Jennifer Holmgren (1985, 11-14) has suggested that widow fidelity and suicide might not be motivated solely by Confucian attitudes against remarriage but also by notable changes in inheritance patterns. Moreover, there is a solid body of literature on widows lamenting the misdeed of their marital family and being forced to remarry for the betrothal gifts that they could bring to the family, or worse, be sold into concubinage and prostitution. Suicides arising by reason of this or in connection with conjugal pressures, abusive language and failed divorce petitions are well documented, in some cases covering also the mid- to late-republican era (1927-49). See Huang 2001, 8-9, 16, 47-8; Yang 2013, 244.

a husband be prosecuted for injuring or even murdering his wife, he could appeal to the law and, by pointing to her alleged unfiliality with respect to his parents, he would eventually escape conviction (Smith 1894, 201-2). About half of the twenty-three cases of suicide pulled together in the *Xing'an huilan* 刑案匯覽 (Conspectus of Judicial Cases) – by far the largest collection of legal records ever compiled in the centuries of imperial rule – involve women with similar backgrounds, and among the most frequent crimes therein enumerated, "pressing a person into committing suicide" is second on the list only to "murdering a wife's paramour" (Bodde, Morris 1967, 162, 190).

Rather than outright physical force or intimidation, it is the Confucian insistence on role-based ethics, and more specifically its preoccupation with family authority, inter-generational duties, and ancestor worship that informs the gendered narrative(s) of Chinese suicide in late imperial times. Jiang Yonglin has shown that when it comes to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), negative portraits of womanhood do not give a complete picture of what were women's legal rights and obligations. His analysis of the *Da Ming lü* 大明律 (Great Ming Code) reveals that, on the one hand, women could make their life meaningful by confining themselves to family roles, and within such roles have their rights protected. On the other hand, their acceptance of family roles helped maintain a legal structure that (1) fostered a male-dominated gender hierarchy, and (2) upheld the authority of senior members, including the authority of elder women over their inferior, male and female alike (Jiang 2014, 36-8).[9] By the Ming times, a fundamental shift occurred in the family system. With the greater legal incorporation of women into their marital family and the focus of women's filiality being redirected away from their own natal kin, female suicide and fidelity in the form of self-mutilation became common and desirable ways to express wifely virtue (Bernhardt 1996, 50; Hinsch 2016, 166). Although women's fidelity and complete dedication to patriarchal purity had been celebrated as a virtue for centuries, Ming *literati* (re)valorised these violent expressions of chastity in terms of 'rightful passion' (*qing* 情), bearing analogies with the meritorious and loyal official who laid down his life for the empire and fought in defence of his community (Carlitz 1997, 612-13, 617 ff.).[10] In the sphere of song-poetry, romantic drama and fiction, the *literati*'s fascination with *qing* contributed to dramatise and aestheticise suicide, making it a medium for moral education while simultaneously

9 Women could gain leverage after they became mothers or mothers-in-law and, as demonstrated by Margery Wolf (1975, 126-7), sought to monopolise male sources of power by retaining the loyalty of their sons for themselves or preventing their foster-daughters from compromising it.

10 More on chastity and political loyalty *vis-à-vis* the intellectual reorientation of the seventeenth century in Zurndorfer 1999b, 8-9.

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filling it with male-constructed evocations of sensual love and visions of order (Carlitz 2001). Women's virtuous suicide – to avoid remarriage, resist rape or follow a husband in death – became a prominent theme in chastity accounts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. That these are found in nearly every Ming-era gazetteer biography of women (Elvin 1999, 174)[11] and the *Mingshi* 明史 (Official Ming History) contains the highest number of biographies than any other dynastic period speaks of the waning of ideals of widow chastity and suicide (Waltner 1981, 131, 142-3 fn. 65; Carlitz 1994, 108-9, 113-14).[12]

In the first half of the dynasty, the incidence of women taking their lives after the loss of a spouse or fiancé was not sufficiently high to constitute a remarkable social fact. It is only with the late Ming (1567-1644) that suicides became rife and chastity practices spread well beyond the élite strata of society, signalling the beginning of "a new moral epoch", as T'ien Ju-k'ang labels it, in the history of China (T'ien 1988, 1-4). While this emerging cult of chastity served to inculcate loyalty to the Confucian state and re-sinicise society after almost three centuries of foreign regime, i.e. the Jin (1115-1234) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties (Carlitz 1994, 104), the issuing of imperial chastity awards compelled families of filial daughters and wives to lobby for public recognition and prestige. The state's failure to honour women from the lower classes uncovered the injustice of chastity awards, and gave more visibility to cases of *ailie* 哀烈 (tragic chaste martyrdom), essentially daughters-in-law who suffered domestic abuse or fell prey to murderers (Fei 2012, 999-1000).

Discourses of female virtue changed little over the Qing (1644-1911), when the cult gained momentum and policies on awarding chastity acquired a distinctively ethnic flavour. If during the Ming dynasty official sponsorship of female virtue was part of a national renewal movement aimed at re-sinicising the country, in Manchu-ruled China female suicide and physical ordeals of loyalty became an ideological construct to cement the state presence in the ethnically and religiously diverse borderlands of the empire. Chaste martyrdom remained a potent symbol of cultural identity among Han-Chinese élites long after the Ming-Qing transition, which saw Manchu empire-builders abandoning old customs, like accompanying-in-death (*xunzang* 殉葬) and levirate marriage, and advancing a more unified standard of virtue

11 Biographies in local gazetteers cover a range of categories of exemplary women, the largest of which is the one of 'faithful widows' (*jiefu* 節婦) who were bereaved before the age of thirty and stayed chaste till fifty.

12 Katherine Carlitz (1994) notices that although widowhood did not necessarily lead to suicide, as many women actually decided to live on with their marital family and had their purpose respected by disfiguring themselves, gazetteer biographies account of a 1:3 ratio of suicide to lifelong widowhood and those where women did kill themselves are by far richer in details than the others.

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and sexual morality (Theiss 2001, 49-50). In the eighteenth century, a new gender regime came into place mandating stricter regulations on sexual behaviours across socioeconomic status. As local officials intensified surveillance of such behaviours, the male and female subjects of the empire were held to fixed marital roles (Sommer 2000, 10-11, 305-6). Under the emperors Yongzheng 雍正 (r. 1722-35) and Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1735-96), with the state patronising the cult of chastity, widow suicides were eulogised, and memorial arches (*paifang* 牌坊), stone tablets, and shrines to the chaste and filial (*jiexiao ci* 節孝祠) raised in their honour. After Qianlong ascended to the throne, female virtue was elevated to a symbol of civilisation, a tool in the Qing ethnic policy toolkit "to pacify barbarians with impartial kindness" and to "provid[e] local models of the dutiful loyalty expected of subjects" (Theiss 2001, 64). A 1783 memorial stipulates that non-Han women other than Manchus who abstained from sex in widowhood could be granted imperial honours (Tao 1991, 104). According to Mark Elliott, in sixty-one years on the throne, the Qianlong Emperor canonised over 12,200 widows among the eight banners alone, which means that every year no less than 200 women were recognised as virtuous widows across the three major ethnic divisions of the banner system (Manchu, Mongol, and Han), resulting in an overall six-fold increase (80%) compared to the first century of Qing rule (1644-1735) (Elliott 1999, 35 tab. 1.1., 67). Suicide rates considerably accelerated in this period and even further in the mid-nineteenth century (Elvin 1984, 135), with also some cases of melodramatic suicide whereby the widow is escorted to a public platform and forced to hang herself there before a crowd of spectators.[13] A high percentage of suicides is found among young widows eligible for canonisation and betrothed or low-born girls who carried out a private vendetta for rape, human trafficking, and other abuses. Honouring widows who killed themselves after a sexual assault or upon their husband's death and institutions that supported this practice lasted till the mid-republican era (1930s), when new ones arouse in central and southern coastal China (Tao 1991, 106, 117). If it is true that the suicide of these women was inextricably tied to Confucian ideals of virtue and the ethics of state paternalism that rewarded their marital family with material benefits, official titles, and the right to erect chastity memorial arches and steles (Theiss 2004, 30-1, 212-13), it is also true that the message sent by women who killed themselves to pursue social justice was barely compatible with such ideals and ethics.

13 According to T'ien (1988, 51-2, 54), this type of deeply ritualistic suicide was prevalent in the Fujian province during the early-to-mid Qing dynasty, approximately from 1640 to 1860, with the last recorded case appearing in 1854. He estimates that in Quanzhou and Fuqing 福清 it was the preferred method of self-killing accessible to women, outnumbering death by drowning, poisoning, piercing and starving.

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Among the non-Han indigenes of upland southwestern China who had no prejudice against remarriage, suicide was rather a reaction to the Chinese system of rule. As the political rhetoric about chastity intensified and Confucian standards of morality started being imposed upon them, female suicide became rapidly popular, most markedly after native chiefs were removed from office and their territories integrated into the regular imperial administration (*gaitu guiliu* 改土歸流) by Emperor Yongzheng. It is significant that all through the High Qing (1683-1796) up till the reign of Jiaqing 嘉慶 (1796-1820), at a critical juncture in the process of state's peripheral expansion, the imperial government lent increased support to the promotion of chastity ideals. Not only did it pledge to spread these ideals downward from the ranks of Han *literati* élites to ordinary people, it also spread them outside the traditional heartland of Chinese civilisation, thereby legitimising state intervention in the moral and material lives of the indigenes on China's periphery (Zurndorfer 1999b, 10; Theiss 2001, 62-3). This process is clearly visible in Yunnan. If during the Ming only 1,295 cases of virtuous women (*lienü* 列女) were recorded in local gazetteers, these arose to as many as 9,645 over the Qing. The total number of chaste martyrs (*lienü* 烈女) for the whole Ming-Qing period amount to 2,147, many of whom were women who died to defend their virtue in the midst of attacks by armed groups of bandits and anti-dynastic rebellions. More than 1,500 suicides took place between the reigns of Xianfeng 咸豐 (1850-61) and Tongzhi 同治 (1861-75), when the Panthay rebellion instigated by the self-proclaimed Sultan of Dali Du Wenxiu 杜文秀 (1828-72) drove the province into a spiralling political crisis (Shen 2002). Taken together, these suicides speak of an alarming tendency towards the adoption of chastity-centred gender norms among the newly incorporated non-Han subjects of the empire as they gradually acculturated to Chinese customs. Gender norms became relevant to evolving notions of empire and helped maintain Confucianism's hegemony over the largely animistic borderland minorities. What is at stake here is not so much suicide as a form of violence in its own, but rather the confluence of ethnic policies, state ideology, religion and changing sociocultural values that spurred intense ideas about women's chastity and expressions thereof.

Gender imbalances used to be far less pronounced in the societies of some TB speakers, like the Naxi and Lahu indigenes of upland Yunnan, where different customary laws, courtship preferences, and beliefs applied. In contrast to Han-Chinese women of the southeast coastal region, who took great pains to build their own sphere of influence, the agency of women in these societies was well accepted, if not institutionally sanctioned, even in strongly patrilineal settings. The more egalitarian nature of these societies is mirrored in the gender ratio of suicide rates and cultural milieus that eulogised love over death. Suicides here were not the consequence of state-en-

forced regulations designed to canonise chaste widows. Neither were they merely a tragic endeavour to resist coerced marriage in a fit of uncontrolled and ephemeral passion. In the past century, until the early decades of Communist rule, love-suicide among the Naxi was a mutual covenant known as *yu-vu* (lit. 'to be loving much') stipulated between a couple or multiple couples who, while refusing to give in to Confucian virtue ethics and standards of sexual propriety, decided to take the fatal step in the belief that their souls would reunite in the world of the dead (Yang 2008, 2-7, 12-17).[14] The inducement to suicide – as attested also in Lahu love songs and the now banned ritual protocols followed by Naxi priests to propitiate the so-called demons of suicide (Naxi *har-la-llü-k'ö*) – is that there would be no more death, nor rebirth, but prosperous life in an idyllic place of perpetual youth happiness and passionate love (Rock 1939, 2-3, 7, 19; Du 1995, 207-8, 211). Indeed, the firm belief in life-after-death and transcendent truth(s) detected in these cultures is one of the most noticeable differences with the Han-Chinese version of suicide. It is on this premise that I will now proceed to explore views on, beliefs about and attitudes towards suicide in the coastal provinces of southeastern China that remain relatively unresearched.

3 Representations of Suicide in the Southeast Coastal Region

Much has been written about the ill-treatment of daughters-in-law by their stepmothers, or the legal institution of concubinage that provoked incessant quarrels, hatred, and jealousy in the household. Nonetheless, the dreadful behaviour of women who internalised Confucian virtue to such an extent to mutilate themselves or use suicide aggressively to incriminate somebody is poorly understood.

3.1 *Ligui*, Spirit Marriage, and Confucian Gender Distinctions

Research on Chinese folk religion has linked self-killing with occult feminine forces, as epitomised by the restless ghosts classified as *ligui* 厲鬼, who roam among the living to restore their family reputa-

14 The oldest extant and reliably dated ritual text of the Naxi that deals specifically with love-pact suicide was compiled in 1851 (Jackson 1971, 78), whereas other texts go back to as early as 1703 or even 1573 (Rock 1963, 44), and it is possible that over the centuries many old copies were also duplicated and replaced by new ones (Jackson 1965, 165). This means that *yu-vu* might have very ancient roots that date back to no later than the Kangxi era or even before the Manchus ruled over China, but given the current state of research it is difficult to know when exactly the Naxi started to pursue it.

tion, stop malicious and envy-fuelled gossip, seek retribution against a foe, or prove their innocence in criminal trials.[15] These religiously loaded representations of suicide draw extensively from the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth and from beliefs in an otherworldly place of torment presided over by a pantheon of deities, like King Qin Guang (*qinguang wang* 秦廣王), Door Guardians (*menshen* 門神) and the Stove God (*zaojun* 竈君), who keep track of people's good and bad deeds or, in the case of King Qin Guang, allot proportionate punishments. This also includes special hells for women and the 'city of suicides' (*wangsi cheng* 枉死城) where those who killed themselves for goals other than filial piety, chastity, or justice, as well as men who fell in battle, are all dispatched and tried (Doré 1922, 256, 263, 292-6). Former analyses of such beliefs, as reflected in Ming epitaphs and gazetteers, Qing records of oral prose, and anthologies of classical-language or vernacular stories that form the bulk of the *zhiguai* 志怪 genre ('accounts of strange events'), have argued that conflicting feelings of fear, morbid sexual attraction, and sympathy for suicide ghosts are regularly inscribed in stereotypical portraits of womanhood that were meant to consolidate Confucian gender-roles and hierarchies (Carlitz 2011, 188-91; Yu 1987, 415-22; Huntington 2005).

Anthropological approaches have proved useful in dissecting misogynistic readings of piety, dutifulness, and loyalty. They have helped advance the argument that deeply ingrained misogynistic ideas were made to transcend people's day-to-day existence, projecting themselves in the world of ancestral spirits, earthbound souls, tutelary gods, and other supernatural forces whose actions were to bring good fortune or misery to humans. 'Spirit marriage' (*minghun* 冥婚) is one of the most emblematic examples of how strong the grip of these categories was on the popular imagination. As David Jordan has opined,

> [c]ulturally and structurally there is every reason not to be surprised that it is the girls who become ghosts, and that they are pacified and laid to rest by providing them with a husband and line of descendants who undertake to worship them. (Jordan 1971, 183)[16]

That special arrangements of this kind were made to send the soul of an unmarried daughter away from her natal home suffices to il-

15 As recorded in the *Zhouli* 周禮 (Rites of Zhou), earliest references to these ghosts who died unjustly and demand revenge date back to the Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BCE), but it was no earlier than the Six Dynasties (220-80 CE) that in some parts of China, above all in Jiangnan 江南, a cult was built around them and appropriate ritual actions deployed for their pacification (Lin 2008, 415-16, 507-8, 521 ff.).

16 More on female ghosts as personification of sociocultural anomalies and ways through which their disruptive power is reabsorbed into the patrilocal family in Harrell 1986, 102-3, 108-10.

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luminate the overlap between the ordinary activities of human life and their otherworldly manifestations. Gender distinctions hence extended to embrace the dead from the family past. Additional proof is that trained soul-raisers – predominantly women – were hired to minimise the risk of illness, financial reverses, and other misfortunes which the unfortunate soul or minor local deities were purported to cause the family.[17] If the soul was that of a faithful maiden (*zhennü* 貞女) who killed herself after being given away in a childhood betrothal, misfortunes could be very serious because wives – whether as infants or young adults – had more rights than women who did not enter into any conjugal relationship, including Buddhist or Taoist nuns.[18] It is no wonder that, until the early twentieth century in some villages of the Canton Delta, betrothals were kept secret in order to prevent suicide and deter daughters from becoming targets of Buddhist nunneries who might train them in malevolent magic and deadly arts.[19] Hierarchies and distinctions based upon sex, seniority, and kinship were constantly displayed in one or the other realm of the refined system of social organisation that is Chinese Confucianism.

Both strains of research have shown that in the Confucian scheme of things, supernatural agencies were made to replicate the top-down patriarchal order of society, where "the gods were officials; the

17 Jack Potter's chapter on *mann seag phox* (Cantonese 'old ladies who speak to the spirits') in early-1960s Canton and Donald Sutton's on ritual trance (Hokkien *tang-ki*) in mid-1980s Taiwan are indispensable references for research of Chinese female mediumship. More recently, the gender role of ghosts, spirits and deities has been downplayed. Erin Cline, for example, has dismantled the assumption that male tutelary gods ranking higher in the celestial bureaucracy can be possessed solely by mediums of the same gender. See Potter 1974; Sutton 1989; Cline 2010.

18 Such is the case of a *sim-pu-a* (Hokkien 'little daughter-in-law') as detailed in Arthur Wolf's ethnography of northern Taiwan. Her ghost wants revenge and comes back to prey on her foster mother, and when her fiancé is betrothed to another woman the ghost fights even more aggressively (Wolf 1978c, 152, 165). More on the late imperial cult built around bereaved maidens who either remained loyal to their first betrothed or contemplated the option of suicide in Lu 2008, 129-66.

19 On nunneries giving shelter to anti-marriage sisterhoods and an inducement to suicide, see Topley 1975, 79-81. The idea that celibate Buddhist practitioners and Buddhism in general might have a noxious influence on female virtue is echoed in the mid-Qing admonitions against so-called 'nuns and six old women' – i.e. diviners, brokers, matchmakers, witches, procuresses, female healers, and midwives – who, by distracting women from their filial duties, altered the Confucian rhetoric of gender-role separation (Theiss 2004, 135). In some Cantonese villages, as observed by James Watson in his 1970s ethnography of Yuen Long 元朗 (Hong Kong), the ultimate inversion of feminine roles was staged in funeral processions where, not by chance, those most at risk to be exposed to 'death pollution' (Cantonese *saat hei*) were nuns. Their accompanying the coffin to the grave, chanting sutras to calm the spirits and their celibacy all reflects a condition of sterility that made them bear the largest part of 'killing airs' (*shaqi* 殺氣) released by the corpse. For this reason, "[t]hey are classed, along with monks, as a separate gender – a category of neutered outcasts who live on the margins of society" (Watson 1988, 126-7).

ghosts were bandits and beggars; the ancestors were parents, grandparents and great-grandparents" (Wolf 1978b, viii-ix).[20] Yet, none of them have satisfactorily acknowledged that, regardless of whether suicide was taken as a measure of good wifery or as a weapon to redress misdeeds suffered during one's lifetime, suicide narratives cannot be divorced from projections of state power and visions of order. Through a combination of ritual, moral, and sociocultural devices, suicide strengthened the integrity of such order on both the discursive and practical levels. It was violence justified as virtue or cosmic harmony. At the very same time, it was gendered violence in that it was embedded in patriarchal notions of femininity.

3.2 Bodily Harm and Chastity Suicide in Morality Handbooks

A few selected narratives from Ming-Qing didactic texts for women will help elucidate how this distinctive type of violence became instrumental in cementing ideas of womanhood that conformed to Confucian conventions of sexuality and secured the orthodox ideology both in this earthly world and the next.

Under normal circumstances, women cultivated virtue by fulfilling the idealised type of 'a talented wife and devoted mother' (*xianqi liangmu* 賢妻良母) which required them to stay at home to take care of their parents-in-law and children. For the sake of family reputation, they were expected to take a lifelong vow of chastity all the way through widowhood. Paradoxically, solitary widowhood existed side-by-side with remarriage, which in Ming and early Qing times was usually deemed acceptable, due to the prevalence of female infanticide and the shortage of marriageable girls (T'ien 1988, 23-4, 30-1). The *Nüfan jielu* 女範捷錄 (Short Records of Female Models) by Madame Liu (a.k.a. Liu Shi 劉氏, n.d.) – part of late-Ming *Four Books for Women* (*Nü sishu* 女四書)[21] – provides plenty of examples of widows who demonstrated their virtue and, to avoid being verbally or physically harassed, severed their ears (*ge'er* 割耳), nose (*duanbi* 斷臂), or hands (*bipi* 臂劈), or got their face tattooed (*cemian* 刺面). Here is

20 Stephan Feuchtwang has re-assessed this argument and proposed the notion of "imperial metaphor" to explain that political authority, rather than corresponding to lived structural distinctions of government, status and family organisation, was itself resting on a principle of transcendent authority (Feuchtwang 2001, 56-8).

21 The collection was originally compiled and annotated by Madame Liu's son, scholar Wang Xiang 王相 (d. 1524). The other three titles comprise the *Han-era Nüjie* 女誡 (Admonitions for Women) by Ban Zhao 班昭 (ca. 49-120), the mid-Tang *Nü lunyu* 女論語 (Confucian Analects for Women) by the two sisters Song Ruoshen 宋若莘 (d. 820) and Song Ruozhao 宋若昭 (d. 828), and the *Neixun* 內訓 (Instructions for the Inner Quarters) by Empress Xu (a.k.a. Xu Shi 徐氏, 1362-1407), consort to the Yongle 永樂 Emperor (r. 1402-24).

an excerpt from Chapter 5, under the title "Chastity and Ardency" (*zhenlie pian* 貞烈篇).

> A loyal minister will not serve two nations. An ardent chaste woman will not marry two husbands. Therefore, once the wedding banquet is set for a woman to marry a man, her mind should not change throughout her lifetime. A man may remarry, but a woman should not. Therefore, to go through hardship but retain her integrity is called being "chaste". Generously sacrificing her life for her spouse is called being "ardent". [Hence], Lady Lingnü sliced off her ears and nose to protect her person. Official [Wang] Ning's wife cut her hand off to express her will after a man [other than her deceased husband] touched her hand. Madame Gongjiang stated in her poem: "Till death I will not have any other man". Madame Shi tattooed her face with these words: "I will never change my mind". Lady Huangfu forthrightly scolded a treacherous minister; even when she was beaten to death, she did not stop. The two daughters of the Dou family would not yield to bandits; they unhesitatingly jump over a cliff [to protect their virtue]. (Pang-White 2018, 246-7)

Other noteworthy instances of self-directed violence through which Confucian-style patriarchy asserted its dominance over the sexed female body come from Lü Shujian's 呂叔簡 (1536-1618) textbook *Guifan tushuo* 閨範圖說 (Illustrated and Explicated Models for the Inner Chamber), a compendium of stories gathered from the Western Han (202 BC-9 CE) classic *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Biographies of Exemplary Women) that played a key role in promoting educational materials for women. In reinforcing the ideal that only chaste wives are pious, this source gives a glimpse of the life of those "wives who could not preserve [the integrity] of their body and devotedly followed [their husbands into death]" (*yi qing xunren* 以情狗人) (Lü [1590] 1994, 32, 372),[22] or fiercely "destroyed their beauty" (*huirong* 毀容) to become less attractive to potential rapists. One case concerns Lady Huan who, after being left with no husband, and her son dead at the tender age of fifteen, tears one of her ears apart as a token of conjugal fidelity. So did Maiden Fang, a sixteen-year-old widow who goes as far as to place her ear into the coffin of her deceased fiancé.[23] In other cases, Lady Li saws her left hand with an ax after being approached by the landlord of a guesthouse in Kaifeng where she stopped on her way to

22 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Chinese and other languages are by the Author.

23 "Xing yi Huanli" 行義桓嫠 (Lady Huan Walking in the Path of Righteousness), and "Fangshi jie'er" 房氏截耳 (Maiden Fang Removing Her Ear), in Lü [1590] 1994, 432, 435-6.

send her husband's ashes back to his native village, while Mrs. Wang smears her face with dirt, dishevels her head, and embarks upon a four-year barefoot peregrination around southern China in a fashion resembling the bodily austerity of a Daoist hermit on a solitary journey towards self-fulfillment.[24] That death was the sole viable option left for a dutiful young woman who wanted to maintain her purity without mutilating herself is further clarified in this passage:

> [The woman who refuses to remarry] fights in the face of adversity. [For such a woman] staying alive means renouncing her body. If she doesn't want to sacrifice her virtue [lit. 'lose the body'], she has no choice but to embrace death. Although she embodies the highest moral qualities of Confucius and Mencius, it is only by forfeiting life that she can show her steely determination. Lady Yue [wife of King Zhao of Chu, 515-489 BCE] is the sole person who was able to prove herself without meeting her death. The woman who departs life to prove her purity dies without straying off the right path. (Lü [1590] 1994, 325-6)

Other examples resulting in death include teenage Cao'e who, unable to recover her father's corpse from the flooding river, drowns herself out of despair; Meng Jiang who ends her days much in the same way when she discovers that Qi Lian perished in a fight; Madame Pan self-immolating by fire after a gang of thieves assassinated her husband **[fig. 1a]**; and concubine Zhao who throws herself into the water while holding her master's remains in her hands.[25]

Leaving out of consideration the self-mortification of nuns which was also widely practiced in some Buddhist and Daoist monastic circles out of disinterested concern for the well-being of others or to solicit donations to monasteries (Benn 2007; Goossaert 2002), another glorified act of extreme piety consisting in cutting out flesh from one's limb or other parts of the body to nourish a sick parent was *gegu liaoqin* 割股療親 (filial slicing). Among a sample of 578 Ming stories about female paragons of piety gathered in Jiang Tingxi's 蔣廷錫 (1669-1732) *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成 (Imperial Encyclopaedia), nearly 50% feature women preparing medicines with their own flesh, and the number of these women rose up to two-thirds during the Qing, with 233 cases of *gegu* out of a total of 342 canonised filial women (Lin 1998, 15; Li 1994, 74). The story of Née Chen **[fig. 1b]**,

24 "Lishi duanbi" 李氏斷臂 (Lady Li Sawing Her Hand), and "Wangshi huirong" 王氏毀容 (Mrs. Wang Disfiguring Herself), in Lü [1590] 1994, 438-9, 441-2.

25 "Cao'e qiu fu" 曹娥求父 (Cao'e Looking for Her Father); "Qi Lian zhi qi" 杞梁之妻 (Qi Lian's Wife); "Panshi touhuo" 潘氏投火 (Madame Pan Jumping into the Fire), and "Zhao Yunshi jie" 趙運使妾 (Zhao Yunshi's Concubine), in Lü [1590] 1994, 206-7, 383-4, 408-9, 411-12.

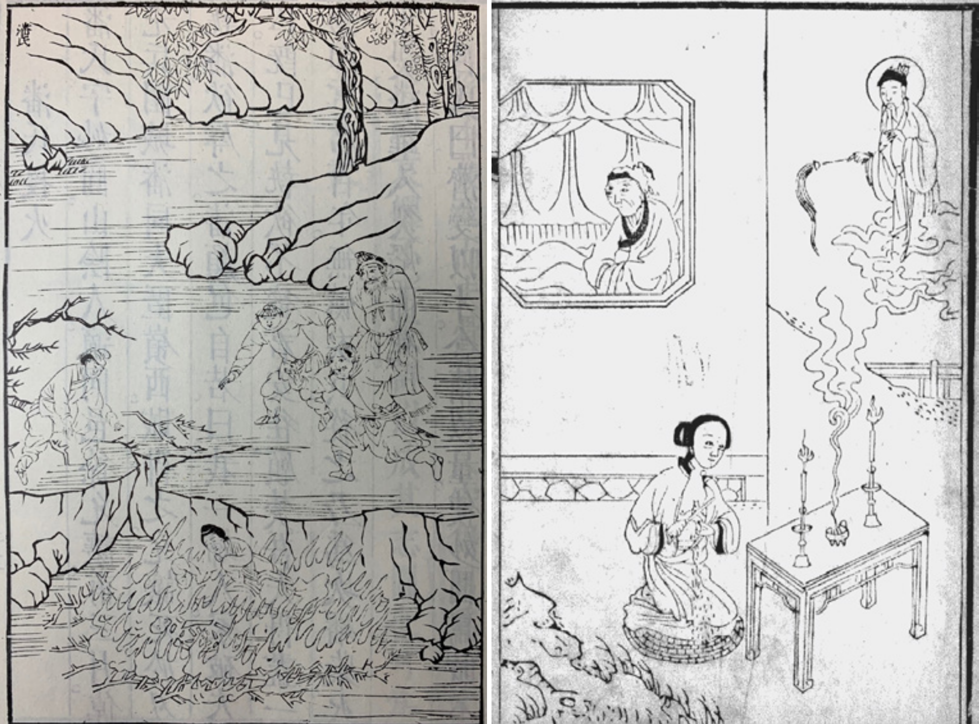

Figure 1a (left) Wood-engraved illustration of Madame Pan as reproduced in Lü [1590] 1994, 407; courtesy of Shanghai guji chubanshe

Figure 1b (right) Née Chen slicing one of her livers to feed her dying mother-in-law as pictorialised in Yu 1872, 15b; stored at Harvard University

which was collated into *Nü ershisi xiao tushuo* 女二十四孝圖說 (Illustrated Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety for Women), catches the aesthetics of such act.[26]

> In Xincheng County, Jiangxi Province, there was once a woman of the Chen family, who married a man by the name of Wang Zongluo. […] Her mother-in-law became gravely ill. […] [A doctor] said: "this malady of old-age is difficult, if not impossible, to cure. Only the liver of a dragon and the marrow of a phoenix can save her." […] Thereupon, praying for blessings from the Kitchen [Stove] God,

26 This anonymously published Ming handbook enjoyed wide circulation in its revised edition of the late Tongzhi period. The original title of the story is "Pougan jiu gu" 剖肝救姑 (Slicing a Liver to Save the Mother-in-Law).

> she took up a knife and sliced into her belly, extracting a piece of her liver. Of this she made a broth, which she served to the sick old lady. [...] When her mother-in-law finished eating, her illness was immediately cured. [...] The mother-in-law lived another twelve years before she died. When the provincial governor Duke Zhou heard this, he presented a placard for the Wang family gate. It read: "such marvellous filial piety reaches all the way to Heaven!" (Yu 1872, 15a, En. transl. in Fang 2012, 81-2)

This is not the place to debate whether these stories are fictional or real – many of them might well be the fictionalisation of historical events imbued with the frustration and perverse sexual fantasies of male *literati* who compiled them. The fact that Confucian precepts of past ages were recuperated in the Ming-Qing, and the feats of Chinese wives and daughters (re)signified through the creation of a new template for women's biographies, demonstrates the extent to which acts of self-referential violence were trumpeted as a way to mould the moral woman. It is therefore accurate to say that these stories contributed to the aestheticisation of female suicides and auto-mutilation.

3.3 Institutionalisation of the Cult of Vengeful Ghosts. Guniang Miao and Other Examples

A further factor that was instrumental in beautifying violence and appears to be correlated to the rise in suicides is the flourishing of folk beliefs in restless female souls, at least in the region south of the Yangtze River (Jiangnan) and in Fujian. Besides the souls of suicide widows, these also comprise the souls of deceased maidens, who were particularly feared, as they were neither married nor did they leave any progeny, and *ergo* remained uncared for.[27] These beliefs speculate that the wrongful death of a chaste woman generates a ghost that roams among the living and punishes people with moral

27 A wife who became widowed before having children was worshipped together with her successor wife on the ancestral hall of her marital family. Similarly, a woman who gave birth without actually being married could also be worshipped on home altars. But these options are not applicable to deceased maidens who, being unmatched and childless, found no place in the patrilocal family and therefore had nobody worshipping them. I have classed the souls of these two groups of women under the same heading, although they relate differently to the obligations of Confucian orthodox code. As mentioned earlier, young widows could remarry – and as a matter of fact they did – but most often chose to outlive their husband without mutilating themselves. Their suicides are anomalous because they exceeded the obligations of the Confucian code, whilst the suicide of maidens is anomalous because it fell short of the obligations of such code. I am grateful to Stevan Harrell for commenting on this (personal communication, 27 September 2020).

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failings. This ultimately led the most vulnerable to convince themselves that they would be better able to persecute their enemies as vengeful ghosts than if they were alive.

From the Ming Hongwu 洪武 reign (1368-98) on, the imperial government made extensive efforts to transform these beliefs so that to knit local society more closely to the emerging Ming state as a whole. Stories of avenging ghosts were recast as martyrs to virtue and retold to fit Confucian orthodoxy and the country's self-image (Carlitz 1997, 633-4). In 1370, the emperor himself drafted a decree that ordered that altars for this class of ghosts (*litan* 厲壇) be established in the then-capital of Nanjing and down to virtually every village of the empire, while government officials were encouraged to make ceremonial offerings to them. As 'uncanonical' altars were converted into shrines, suicide widows started to be venerated as loyal martyrs alongside the spirits of male exemplars – eminent officials and men who died in wartime bringing glory to the country. Between 1572-75, as many as 551 shrines were built within a perimeter of 320 kilometres around Hui'an 惠安, one of the counties of modern-day prefectural city of Quanzhou 泉州, which was notorious for high suicide rates (T'ien 1988, 120-1). Not just social but cosmic harmony was at stake in the rebranding of suicide narratives. While providing people with the moral capital to uphold Confucian ritual norms and values, these were designed also to avert unstable weather, calamities, and pandemics, as (im)moral actions were supposed to have massive repercussions on the natural world. Later, in Manchu-ruled China, both Yongzheng and Xianfeng issued edicts that required people to make implements for sacrifice at *litan* altars within the City-God temple (Yu 2012, 109-12). Meanwhile, over the years of Guangxu 光緒 regency (1875-1908), in rural eastern China, idol-temples dedicated to local midwives like Dame Koh-ku (*Gegu*) 葛姑 and her martyred daughter grew in notoriety. The services of these women whose death became the emblem of undefiled obedience were so esteemed that public processions accompanied by music, flags, incense burning, and prostrations were held in their memory every year for several days during the republican era in many villages around Hezhou 和州 in Anhui (Doré 1933, 66-7).

Propitiation offerings of similar kind have managed to survive today in some periurban areas throughout Taiwan, where burial and worship sites have been built to memorialise lonely maidens (*guniang* 孤娘) and deified female ghosts (*xiannü niang* 仙女娘). Examples of such sites are found in Shiding 石碇 **[fig. 2]** and Sanhsia (*Sanxia*) 三峽, two major districts in New Taipei. "Families that want to rid themselves of an unmarried daughter", has contended Arthur Wolf with respect to the latter, "deposit the ashes that represent her in what is known as *ko-niu-bi-ou* [Hokkien for *guniang miao* 姑娘廟, lit. 'girls' temple']" (Wolf 1978c,

149-50).[28] The souls of maidens are either lodged in temples like this or propitiated in an out-of-the-way part of the house where they don't disturb the patriarchal order portrayed in the ancestral hall. These female souls, who are excluded from and yet entangled with the workings of the family system, encapsulate the ideological underpinnings of Confucian ritual orthodoxy and its manoeuvring to bring any heterodox belief about afterlife and childbirth back into the fold. More precisely, they serve the purpose of reminding women of their subordinate position. They warn against infringements on the code of filial piety and basic tenets of modesty, thus dissolving the danger posed by uncontrolled female sexuality – ethereal or otherwise – to the patriarchal authority. It is no wonder that sites like the ones at hand receive most of their support from social outcasts like feminist activists, independent-minded women who choose to stay single or to not bear offspring, nuns, and even prostitutes, who may idolise the souls of these girls as a collective deity (Wolf 1978c, 150; Huang 2008, 130-2).[29]

Figure 2 Main hall of a *ko-niu-biou* built in 1918 in Shiding, Yongding Village, to the memory of Maiden Wei Bian 魏扁 (1862-79) (photo by the Author, September 2020)

28 As for the *ko-niu-biou* in Shiding, see Lin 1995, 101-2; Huang 2008, 102-3, 109-10, 118-19.

29 On unincorporated dead and ghosts as a residual category that threatens family life and its association with unclean sexuality, as well as on the offerings made to them by outsiders and the lower strata in contemporary Taiwan, see also Weller 1994, 129-32, 135-7, 142-3.

Again in New Taipei, a late-nineteenth century missionary account reports of a woman's bodily remains being enshrined and turned into an object of widespread veneration, appealing to people at the margins of society as much as to the well-to-do classes.

> In 1878, a girl living not far from Tamsui wasted away and died, a victim of [opium] consumption. Someone in that neighborhood, more gifted than the rest, announced that a goddess was there, and the wasted skeleton of the girl became immediately famous. She was given the name *sien-lu-niu* [Hokkien for *xiannü niang*] (Virgin Goddess), and a small temple was erected for her worship. The body was put into salt and water for some time, and then placed in a sitting position in an armchair, with a red cloth around the shoulders and a wedding-cap upon the head […]. Mock money was burned and incense-sticks laid in front. […] Before many weeks, hundreds of sedan-chairs could be seen passing and repassing, bringing worshipers, especially women, to this shrine. Rich men sent presents to adorn the temple, and all took up the cry of this new goddess. (Mackay 1895, 127)

Although it is not specified what compelled the girl to poison herself, it can be inferred from the way she is dressed that she was yet to get married when she died, as red is the preferred colour in Chinese wedding ceremonies and, most importantly, it is the colour of the bride's dress.

A woman who planned to kill herself and chose to exploit the fear of ghosts to avenge herself after death might also dress in red, as red symbolises the heightened life force of blood and as such sets itself in opposition to the dehumanised nature of the person being incriminated through suicide (ter Haar 2019, 10-11; cf. Ho 2000).[30] Her suicidal intents were sometimes written in the form of an autobiographical poem, as is the case with Huang Shuhua 黃淑華 (1847-64) who at the eve of the Taiping's occupation of Nanjing killed herself, and left a note describing her plight and plan to take revenge upon her kidnappers (Fong 2001, 121-8). In this last regard, a physician to the French legation in Beijing, J. Matignon (1866-1928), elaborates:

> The Chinese who seek revenge take all precautions so that their death bears the desired fruits. […] Some people who are about to commit suicide fear that their indictment will be stolen and, therefore, that justice may not give them posthumous satisfaction. They write it down directly on their skin, knowing that nobody will dare

30 ter Haar (2019) comments on Ho (2000) and the symbolism of red clothes in real-life executions which made criminals appear more like a hungry ghost than a human.

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> to rub it away because there is a Chinese precept that claims that the strokes drawn on the skin of a dead person are impossible to be washed away. (Matignon 1899, 87)

Martyrdom acquires here a vivid supernatural dimension. The ghost of a wrongfully treated woman returns to haunt the living, and suicide is premeditated to implicate somebody (i.e. an abusive husband, one of his senior wives and concubines, the parents-in-law, or a debauched local official) in a charge of manslaughter, file a lawsuit against him or his family, and ruin their lives.

3.4 Female Souls as Divinely Aided Dispensers of Justice?

As delineated in Mark Lewis' inquiry into the articulation of violence in imperial China, stories of "avenging ghosts and aggrieved souls" (*yuanhun* 冤魂) who retaliate against their murderers must not be discredited as purely fictional: "[they] were accepted to such a degree that they were repeatedly offered in the orthodox, dynastic histories as factual events with genuine explanatory power" (Lewis 1990, 88). The considerable number of entries related to them in foundational texts such as the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian) and later official chronicles reveals how deep-rooted was the belief that "Heaven itself, whether as a deified cosmos or personified deity [i.e. the emperor], enforced its justice through supporting personal vengeance in the world of men" (Lewis 1990, 88).[31] This has yet to be systematically researched by scholars of Chinese religions,[32] but it is a leitmotif in the *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* 傳奇 (marvel tales) anthologies as best exemplified by Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) most acclaimed collection *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 (Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio) and Yuan Mei's 袁枚 (1716-98) equally acclaimed *Zibuyu* 子不語 (What the Master Does Not Speak of). In many of these stories, suicide is the corollary of a woman's own free will, and her ghost embodies evil forces that can push people to hang or drown themselves. It is in such a situation that female agency can be exerted, and women transcend their role of exemplary wives in which frustrated male *literati* had them imprisoned. Notable examples are the *Liaozhai*'s "Hanging Female Ghost" and "Ghost from the Temple".[33] In the latter, a ghost that dwells in a City-God temple presents herself as a beautiful woman who almost kills her victim, the entry-level licentiate Wang Qihou 王啟後. Most of the time, the ghost's actions are

31 Lewis (1990) points to evidence from Cohen 1979; 1982.

32 For some examples see Katz 2008 and Lin 1995, 81-98.

33 Zhang 1986, vol. 1, ch. 6, "Yi Gui" 縊鬼, 780-1; vol. 1, ch. 2, "Miao Gui" 廟鬼, 138.

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aimed at redressing a past wrong. Such is the case of "Mei Girl" and "Yao An".[34] Here, respectively, a young lady who killed herself out of shame and Lü'e 绿娥, Yao An's wife, return from the dead to vindicate themselves, break free of worldly unfairness, and seek justice against a corrupt district jailor and murderous husband.

If in the two stories above supernatural violence creates an opportunity for subaltern women to empower themselves and challenge male hegemony in death, the limited opportunities for legal indictment (*fanggao* 放告) available to them would lead us to opposite conclusions. As recounted in the *Zibuyu* and commented by Paul Katz in his analysis of the links between divine oaths and gender, whenever a ghost files a charge of gang rape, adultery, homicide, or another serious crime to the underworld's legal bureaucracy, and asks for a punishment to be inflicted on the offender, she is entitled to do so only through culturally-sanctioned means, that is by making a formal petition before underworld officials and the nearby City God (Katz 2008, 100-3). In that respect, "Student Song" (*Song sheng* 宋生) illuminates how jilted women can have their plaints approved and avenge themselves on the grounds of their lifetime pious commitment. The story goes that a private teacher surnamed Li takes pity on Song Zongyuan 宋宗元, an orphaned boy from Suzhou who is mistreated by his old uncle. Mr. Li gives him housemaid Zheng in marriage until one day the uncle forces him to seek a divorce and remarry with a wealthier woman. Zheng then kills herself and the daughter whom she bore to Song, while Song is pressured to hire a Daoist master to have her suicidal soul jailed in Fengdu 酆都, the city of ghosts. After Zheng serves a three-year sentence there, the City God accepts her complaint (*yuansu* 冤訴) to even the score with the Song family and praises her chastity (Santangelo, Yan 2013, 776-8). That women like Mei, Lü'e, and Zheng, even when dressing the part of a ghost, must present themselves as filial-loyal subjects under Confucian orthodoxy in order to have their voices heard and wrongs righted helps legitimise male-biased interpretations of authority. The image of wronged souls lingering near the crime scene becomes here a vehicle for moral lessons. Justice is achieved by lethal or quasi-lethal violence, via retaliation and supernatural sanction, as if female death is itself the price to be paid to ease social tensions and restore harmony at all levels, in everyday life as well as in the offices of heavenly and underworld administration. The emphasis lies less on the suffering of women as a disadvantaged group than on the enforcement of Confucian norms, and the unruly feminine powers at play behind suicide work in a markedly approbatory way, as a means to castigate those guilty of disobeying such norms.

34 Zhang 1986, vol. 2, ch. 7, "Mei Nü" 梅女, 907-37; vol. 1, ch. 8, "Yao An" 姚安, 223-4.

Despite noticeable differences in genre, stylistic choices, and narrative plots, the message of these stories is that women can become a hallmark of Confucian virtue by inflicting violence upon themselves and silently accepting the prescribed code of honourability that had chaste widowhood defined by a heavily male-dominated family system, inculcated through filial female exemplars and ultimately transformed into an object of state paternalism. Even when suicide is recounted through the entertaining medium of *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* collections, it hardly escapes the mainstream social values that gave women too little space for asserting themselves and characterised the seductive power of their bodies in utterly negative terms, as something to be brought under control or then it can engender severe disruptions of such system. That women are more likely to personify the ghost who suffers because of some structural anomalies within the family and obtains justice through violent means further confirms this postulate. Moreover, the fact that they are entitled to do that only in the shape of a discontented ghost who restlessly rambles like a bandit or beggar amidst the living is per se relevant: they are either hateful souls or neglected dead to be feared or to sympathise with but never falling within the spectrum of normality. With this in mind, it can be surely affirmed that suicide had both a disciplinary and regulatory function in that it made of women sacrificial victims whose execution was compulsory to restore order in society.

4 The Cultural Repertoires of Naxi and Lahu People in Upland Yunnan

In addition to this mainstream tradition of suicide, which was overly politicised and entrenched in secular conceptions of chastity and filiality, there was a markedly religious one which developed in response to such conceptions, despite at times intersecting with or feeding into them. I analyse it in the subsequent sections through the lenses of two minorities of the TB language family, the Naxi and Lahu. This will lay the groundwork for a broader discussion of the underlying contradictions between the Han-Chinese moral imaginary and the customary practices of the said minorities.

4.1 Case Study 1. The Naxi

At present, the Naxi population totals 326,295 people (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020, tab. 25-19),[35] most of whom are found in the Yulong 玉龍 Naxi Autonomous County (YNAC) and small- or middle-sized urban settlements on the easternmost extension of the Sub-Himalayan belt, along the upper reaches of the Yangtze (Jinsha 金沙) and Mekong (Lancang 瀾滄) rivers in northwestern Yunnan and southern Sichuan. Throughout their territory, that expands from Lijiang (*Ngu-bä* in the local parlance) to the western shores of the Jinsha River at Fengke 奉科, the Naxi are universally patrilineal. Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, however, there was a diversity of marriage customs, with higher degrees of sexual freedom and flexible patrilineal arrangements in the more remote mountain regions. In the Lijiang Basin, where sinicised Naxi chiefs and cultural élites used to live, they are reported to have broken off with matrilateral alliances since the mid-Ming period (Mathieu 2003, 235-7, 354; Mathieu 2014, 252-4), after which they abode by patrilateral cross-cousin marriage prescriptions and premarital chastity.[36] There is no better illustration of how discourses of chastity were instrumental in pulling non-Han indigenes under the tutelage of state's civilising project than the late imperial policies towards the Naxi society. Reflecting a broader agenda of state-building and unprecedented expansion over the non-Han peripheries of the empire, these policies set a precedent of Confucian rulership that, as claimed by some observers, transformed indigenous customs (i.e. dress code, inheritance, clan names, marriage and burial rites), weakened women's social status and thereby stirred a wave of female suicides (Jackson 1971, 59-61, 87-8; Yang 2021, 155-6).

35 This estimate includes also the population of a small but sizeable group of people (c. 50,000) known as the Mosuo who are matriarchal and therefore identify themselves as culturally distinctive, although they are classed as one official ethnic minority together with the Naxi. According to the ethnic classification criteria currently in use by the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Naxi proper and Mosuo (a.k.a. Hli-khin or Nari), centred in Lijiang 麗江 and Yongning 永寧 respectively, are believed to be descended from the same people.

36 Matrimonial alliances in tribal societies might concern the institutionalised exchange of sexual partners among consanguineal kin groups. The exchange often involves cross-cousins, that is the offspring of a parent's opposite-sex sibling. A man can therefore marry the daughter of his own mother's brother (i.e. maternal uncle's offspring, MBD in anthropological jargon), or the daughter of his own father's sister (paternal aunt's offspring, FZD). In the first case the offspring is exchanged matrilaterally, while in the second this happens patrilaterally, as among the Naxi and some other minorities of southwestern China. Patrilateral cross-cousin matches are quite rare across the world, because marriage ties can hardly be renewed each generation and hence is by far less sustainable than matrilateral ones. Refer to Levi-Strauss 1969, xxxii; cf. footnote 40.

4.1.1 Religious Syncretism, Incest Prohibitions, and Redefinition of Kin Categories

Naxi gender-roles were redefined in the course of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Most scholars maintain that suicides stemmed from the Manchus permanently redefining these roles and imposing a system of betrothal on the Naxi. Christine Mathieu, conversely, has argued that it was not the Manchus that imposed such system but the Naxi themselves. She explains that Naxi chiefs developed patrilateral cross-cousin marriage arrangements far earlier during the Ming, because through premises of betrothal they could keep Naxi girls in their own lineages, better manage inter-clan relations, and discourage intermarriage with Han immigrants. Couples or individuals who did not fulfil these premises and fell in love with someone other than their betrothed saw killing themselves as an honourable way out to beg their designated parents-in-law for forgiveness. She advances this hypothesis on the grounds that all the TB people in Yunnan had suicide customs, enjoy premarital sexual freedom and, except for the Mosuo (eastern Naxi), these very same people tend to be organised patrilineally (Mathieu 2003, 233-4, 260-1, 354-6). Although there is disagreement on whether suicide was a desperate act of resistance to Confucian-style marriage rites or the persistence of a legal bond entrenched in the culture of these people, what is irrefutable is that between the late Hongwu and beginning of Wanli 萬曆 (r. 1572-1620) eras, exactly when the state's initiatives enhanced the appeal of chastity awards all over coastal China, a large flow of migrants from the Jiangnan region, most notably from Nanjing, poured into Lijiang and Naxi chiefs (Mu lineage) became increasingly concerned with Confucian ritual prerogatives.[37] By then, the Mu royal house (r. 1383-1723)

37 It is hard to assess the number of this group of Han immigrants with certainty, but most of them had a military background and, like the land-hungry peasant immigrants from populous Jiangnan, were sustained by government incentives. Lu Ren has calculated that over the Ming dynasty no less than 800,000 garrisoned troops were dispatched to Yunnan together with their wives and children. In 1386, a contingent of 13,000 soldiers was sent to Beisheng 北勝 (modern-day Yongsheng 永勝, an administrative division of Lijiang) to set up a military-farming colony and tighten control over the northwestern part of the province. During the mid and late Ming, the Han settlers of this colony, known as the 'Lancang Guard', drew closer to local minorities, like the Naxi, Nuosu (branch of the Yi) and other tribal groups (Lu 2015, 98-104). Meanwhile, the mountains of the Tiesuo 鐵索 Valley to the south of Erhai 洱海 Lake, around Dali 大理, became a refuge for some of these groups, above all the Lisu, who sought to resist the Ming-led transformation of local society and kept distinguishing themselves and the other former inhabitants of the Dali Kingdom (937-1254) from the descendants of Ming armed forces allied with the newly installed Confucian élites (Ma 2014). James Lee ascertained an interrupted concentration of people in the whole of western Yunnan from 1502 up to 1576, with an overall registered population of 1,410,094 in the province and Lijiang counting 57,713 people (2,328 households) in 1502 (Lee 1982, 715, 718, tabs 1 and 2). The total estimates are confirmed by Yang Bin who has specified that

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had already acculturated to Chinese customs to an extent that the *Mingshi* praises them as the best among all tribal chieftains in Yunnan to perform Confucian rites (Yang B. 2008, ch. 5). Under Mu Gong 木公 (r. 1527-53), Naxi élites picked up the habit of constructing memorial arches to honour the elderly women of their lineages and rewrote genealogies in a Chinese fashion (Mathieu 2014, 240-1, 253-4).

It is reasonable to assume that expectations of premarital chastity were introduced by Han-Chinese immigrants and might have had some influence on indigenous views of suicide. Yet chastity alone does not explain why suicide came into vogue among the Naxi, nor does it explain how the practice acquired religiously-flavoured and romantic tinges that allegorise illicit love. One can find an answer to these questions by looking at the religious diversity that typifies this tribal society at the foothills of Chinese Himalayas and the mythological rationale that informs its suicide narratives. To be sure, due to proximity to Tibet, Naxi culture has been strongly influenced by Tibetan beliefs. In the late Ming (viz. 1590-1650), members of the Naxi élite endorsed the teachings of Karma-pa, a subdivision of the Kar-gyu-pa sect of Buddhism. But things changed dramatically when the Manchus gained a foothold around Lijiang and deposed the Mu chiefs, after which Yongzheng annexed their kingdom into the Qing empire in a process that marginalised women from political life (Jackson 1979, 35-7, 74).[38] A vast number of pictographic ritual texts was compiled in this period of massive social change which saw elements of Buddhism, Daoist-inspired cosmology, and indigenous shamanic ideas exquisitely combined into a syncretic whole, now coming under the rubric of *dto-mba* culture or 'Dongbaism' (Chinese *dongba jiao* 東巴教).[39] One of these texts, whose chanting is regulated by canons passed down orally from generation to generation, yields crucial insights into love-suicide (Naxi *yu-vu*). That is the 'Propitiation to Exorcise the Demons of Suicide' (*har-la-llü-k'ö*, lit. 'wind sway perfor-

by the early sixteenth century, although the indigenes outnumbered the Han, the latter were already the largest group of settlers and by the late Ming the growing inflow of migrants irreversibly changed the local sociodemographic make-up (Yang B. 2008).

38 In most of northwestern Yunnan, especially in nearby Deqin 德欽 (Tibetan Dêqên), the Gelug-pa became predominant and replaced the Kar-gyu-pa after Yongzheng stepped down from power, but this did not happen in Lijiang and other Naxi-heavy areas, like today's Weixi 維西 (Lisu Autonomous County). Although the religious history of Lijiang and eastern Tibet (Khams) is poorly documented until the early seventeenth century, it is unmistakable that the tenth Karma-pa, Chöying Dorje (1604-74), lived in Lijiang and spread Kar-gyu-pa Buddhism there and among the Naxi ("Jang" in Tibetan sources). It was in this period that Naxi kings sponsored the first printed edition of the Buddhist canon. Moreover, the eight Karma-pa Mikyo Dorje (1507-54) had repeatedly travelled to 'Jang Sa-tham (Tibetan for Lijiang) since he was a little child (c. 1516). Refer to Shastri, Russell 1987; Thinley 1980, 91, 105; Song 2009, 104-5.

39 More in Mathieu 2003, 98-108, 112-15, 146-7.

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mance'), one of the longest and latest to be recorded of all *dto-mba* ceremonies. It recalls the story of K'a-mä-gyu-mi-gkyi, the Naxi heroine who, having found herself pregnant to someone other than her betrothed, hangs herself on a tree and deceives her lover, the shepherd boy Nd zi-bö-yíi-lä-p'er, to do the same. Before I dig into the story, it may be useful to give a brief overview of the Naxi kinship pre- and post-incorporation of Lijiang into the Qing state. This will help better understand the contents of the story and make sense of the proliferation of *dto-mba* texts and propitiation ceremonies on suicide.

Not unlike suicide in the neighbouring Nuosu (Northern Yi) society of Liangshan in southern Sichuan where unlawful relations were punished with death (Lin 1961, 70-1), the Naxi version of suicide might have initially worked as a juridical mechanism against incest. The Naxi primal myth 'Descent of Man' (Naxi *ts'o-mber-ssaw*) is replete with allusions to heavenly fathers, Ts'o-zä-llü-ghügh and his siblings, who after surviving a great flood failed to hold to incest prohibitions because they could not go to war and abduct women for marriage. Variants of the myth have it that the flood was itself a sort of divine punishment: the forefathers provoked the flood in the first place precisely because they had committed incest with either their mother or a sister. Despite different interpretations, what is unchanged in all versions is that Ts'o marries Ts'ä-khü-bu-bu-mi, who escorts him down to earth, and the two give rise to a kin system where men marry women who are their cross-cousins (i.e. a daughter of their own father's sisters, FZD) and offspring are exchanged between brothers (Jackson 1975, 26-9, 33). Indeed, contrary to the Nuosu and Mosuo, exclusive patrilateral cross-cousin arrangements – which in the words of Charles McKhann "are the next best thing to incest" (McKhann 1992, 316, cit. in Mathieu 2013, 321) than no marriage at all – used to be very common in Naxi society.[40] Ritual love-suicide then might have begun as a reminder to posterity to abstain from incestuous relations and keep in force the

40 In Nuosu society, marital alliances were not fixed. As in other tribal societies, matches between parallel cousins (i.e. a child of the father's brother, FB, or a child of the mother's sister, MZ) were forbidden because deemed incestuous. The standard marriage type was a cross-cousin one in which, out of economic, status and clan-based feuding concerns, preference was given to the daughter of one's own mother's brother (MBD). This makes the Nuosu's traditional kin system *de facto* a system where men marry women who are matrilateral cross-cousins. Cf. Lin 1961, 71-4; Lu 2001; Liu 2011, 155-6. To the best of my knowledge, among the neighbouring Tibeto-Burman hill tribes the only one to allow FZD or even FZ arrangements was the patrilineal Lisu from the upper Salween (Nu 怒 River) valley, on the Chinese side of the Yunnan-Kachin border. According to James Fraser who back in the early twentieth century proselytised among this branch of the Lisu known as 'central or flowery Lisu', similar arrangements did exist but were very unusual and looked down on. More recent scholarship has also specified that in the old days, besides marrying a cross-cousin, a Lisu could take the widow of an elder brother (i.e. levirate) or the sister of his own deceased wife (sororate) as a bride. Cf. Fraser 1922, ix; Maitra 1993, 151. As for the Mosuo, see below.

said prohibitions. If tenable, this line of inquiry would simultaneously illuminate why (1) a TB-speaking people like the Lahu, outlined below in a separate section, are traditionally exogamous with a bilateral kinship organisation and highly treasure free choice of conjugal partner; (2) while others have preserved matrilocal customs and no marriage prescriptions. The Mosuo are a clear example of that: not only do they still practice cohabitation (Mosuo *ti dzï jï mao the*) and 'furtive visits' (*nana sésé*), but suicide has long been negatively sanctioned and *ergo* infrequent among them (Jackson 1971, 60, 69-70; Cai 2001, 185 ff.).

Patrilateral cross-cousin matches are attributable to a series of structural adjustments made by the Mus who invoked them to address both inter-clan feuding and shifts in Ming frontier politics. As soon as Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328-98) confirmed Mu rulership over tribal Lijiang, Naxi genealogies began to carry patronyms and since no later than 1545 also began to trace descent patrilineally (Mathieu 2014, 252-4, 260-1). Despite persistent controversies in Western academia over the supposed matriliny and female-dominant ideology of the Naxi forefathers (Shih 2010, 34-40; Prunner 1969, 101-2), scholars agree that sweeping changes in the indigenous lifestyle were enforced in 1723, when Lijiang was absorbed under the imperial administration through the policy of *gaitu guiliu*. If in the 1690s no single Confucian temple could be found in Lijiang, within just two years since the removal of native chiefs, three of such temples were built. With local authorities creating a register of chaste women (Yang 2021, 155, 161), penalties for adultery were introduced, and Confucian notions of clan exogamy, paternal authority and filial obedience imparted on the animistic indigenes (Jackson 1971, 59-61; Chao 1990, 63, 66). Suicide became a tribal response to the reversal of kin categories that reenacted the primeval deluge myth, or as Emily Chao puts it, "[an] attempt on the part of the Naxi actors to resist the incorporation of Chinese values and the transformation of the Naxi gender and kinship system" from a rather egalitarian one "with little differentiation between men and women, to a patriarchal system in which women's status was legally and ritually debased" (Chao 1990, 61, 72). In keeping with this strain of research, I shall now examine a few passages of *dto-mba* manuscripts where *yu-vu* is made manifest.

4.1.2 *The Romance of K'a-mä-gyu-mi-gkyi* and Ritual Protocols in the *Har-la-llü-k'ö*

The following excerpt from *The Romance of K'a-mä-gyu-mi-gkyi*, translated in its entirety by Joseph Rock (1884-1962), both confirms the custom of marriage between distant cousins and gives an eloquent description of the heroine's conflictual state of mind in the moments before suicide.

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> If it were not for silver, there would be nothing to match gold with; if it were not for turquoise, coral could not be matched. If it were not for the pine, there would be nothing to match with the oak; if it were not for the *go-nyi-muen-nyi-erh* (clematis), there would be nothing to wind around the tree. [And] if it were not for the son of the *ä-gv* (uncle), the daughter of the aunt could not be bought (married). (Rock 1939, 50)

> K'a-mä-gyu-mi-gkyi tied black rocks in her skirt, and went to the water to die. The surface of the water was a deep blue, her eyes were also a deep blue. "My heart is faint" (she said), [but] she did not (wish) to die and returned. […] She twisted a rope, a new rope (she) took, to the tree she went to commit suicide. The black crown of the tree waved, K'a-mä-gyu-mi-gkyi's heart was faint, the black tree was born dumb […]. (The tree) did not invite her, hence she did not commit suicide and again returned. […] [She] put golden shoes on her feet, (and) to the cliff she went to commit suicide. The countenance of the cliff was pure white, her face was (also) pure white. Her heart was faint, hence she did not commit suicide and returned. (41-3)

> (She exclaimed) "If I go and hang myself I will have peace, my troubles will be over. Not to hang myself would leave me on the verge of misery or distress". (66)

The solicitation to *yu-vu* is done by the analogy of a couple that makes all preparations for their wedding day and motley metaphors in which the spouses figure themselves as gods in the Shi-lo nda xndz(er) (Mount Sumeru of the Buddhist cosmology). One sees K'a-mä-gyu-mi-gkyi urging Nd zi-bö-yíi-lä-p'er to fetch her and intimating that they must terminate their lives together, but the shepherd makes excuses that an old cow got lost and he cannot make it. When he finally arrives at the spot where *yu-vu* was to be achieved, the girl has already hanged herself and turned into a ghost, who then ties the rope with which she killed herself around the boy's neck.

> As you would invite your cattle, so call me back again; saddle the […] horse with a golden saddle, and come and meet me; put my trousseau into the bridal trunk, and meet me with my dowry. […] Let your house be of clouds, come where they rest on the high mountains, come drink the water on the mountain slopes; come eat the sugar on the fir leaves; come use the red tiger as your (riding) horse, herd the white stag as you would your cattle. (50, 60)

> K'a-mä-gyu-mi-gkyi hanged herself […], her body was dead but not her soul; her soul was still able to speak. […] (She said) "Nd zi-

> bö-yíi-lä-p'er draw thy sword […] and cut the hang-rope, the rope with which I tied my neck; take off thy white felt cloak and cover my body; at *zhi-ghügh-muen-dsu-lv* (funeral pyre), there cremate me. Burn me till the bones have again turned white and my body has again turned to embers and soot". (84, 95)

The story was recited as a prelude to *har-la-llü-k'ö* rituals, but sometimes these were carried out both before and after the story was told. The outcome was a five-day long procession interspersed with drama, dance, animal sacrifice, wine, and grain offerings, which could be very costly for the families who held them. The main proceedings were set forth when it was already dark. To summon the demons and conjure them to no longer torment the brokenhearted parents who grieved for the untimely death of a child, spells were pronounced to the rhythm of hand-drums (Naxi *ndaw-k'o*) and metal cymbals (*tz-lěr*). In order to do that, the *dto-mba* officiants who oversaw the rituals could require over a hundred book scrolls to be brought onto the stage and chanted in sequence (He, He 1998, 140, 148-9; Mathieu 2014, 235, 249 fn. 3). Since prior to any funeral rite all dead – regardless of whether suicide is involved – were considered to be demons, there were different books addressing different classes of demons. A powerful one constituting a major reference point for the ceremony was that of the *yu-ts'u* (suicides by hanging) which are represented as being suspended from a rope. Other significant classes are the *dtu*, which have a cornucopia type of head, and the split-headed *dsä*. These demons could be addressed separately to the *har-la-llü-k'ö* in some minor or major ceremonies. The list can go ahead to encompass also the cloud (Naxi *gkyi-ts'u*) and wind (*hâr-ts'u*) demons of suicide, and so on up to a total of ten classes, each of which demanded specific ritual actions to release the soul of the departed into the afterlife so that it could take its place among the ancestors (Rock 1937, 24-5 fnn. 1, 3, 48 fn. 3; He, He 1998, 139, 143). If one died unattended, he or she could not be escorted in the realm of gods and ancestors. His or her soul was taken away by seven female wind demons and become one with them, causing extreme weather, illness, and disasters of various kinds and severity. This made it imperative for the families of those who died unattended to call for a *har-la-llü-k'ö* ceremony and have a *dto-mba* suppress the demons. In the late 1930s, when Rock completed his translation work of two key manuscripts, *har-la-llü-k'ö* was performed almost daily in Lijiang (Rock 1939, 2, 5-6).

In the *dto-mba* ceremonies of pre-1949 Lijiang and other Naxi areas, music had a distinctively ritual function and was intended primarily to please the spirits and ancestors, or to summon ghosts and drive out evil. The *har-la-llü-k'ö* was no exception. In fact, the melodic tunes produced by the Jew's harp (Naxi *k'a-kwuo-kwuo*) were renewed for their persuasive role in *yu-vu* – the harp itself was played

by couples to arrange love-pact suicides and was also used in courtship more generally. The same applied to vocal tunes, more specifically to folksinging subsumed under the *Gguq qil* (lit. 'song') genre, that until recent times was used to express affectionate love, sorrow for the deceased and other feelings, with the lyrics being extemporised. The *Gguq qil* was sung solo or antiphonally, with a man and a woman facing one another or in groups singing alternately, each feeding off the words and tunes of the other. Couples or groups of singers on mountain slopes at a distance of several hundred metres from each other were reputed to be able to 'communicate' their feelings back and forth (Rees 2000, 55-8; Rock 1939, 122-52).[41]

4.1.3 Dramatising Suicide and Pursuing Beauty through Death

One of the first Chinese ethnographers to probe into the *har-la-llü-k'ö* rituals, Academia Sinica's Naxi specialist Li Lin-ts'an 李霖燦 (1913-99), writes about *dto-mba* texts in his long essay "Naxi Stories."

> The Naxi pictographs are so superb that, after reading them, people develop a sweet desire for death. […] Couples of young men and women who are not allowed to fall in love with each other climb to the [Jade Dragon] Snow Mountain and die there by their own hand. To overcome the ghostly influence of the licentious victims of suicide, the Naxi in Lijiang have their own scriptural classic [to be recited]. That is the "Great Prayer to the Wind" [Naxi *har-la-llü-k'ö*]. […] Because one of its suggestive scenes paints a magnificent picture of the "Goddess of Love" [Yu-ndzi-a-dzi] and locates a "Kingdom of Love Suicides" on the top of this mountain, there are plenty of couples bemused by such beauty that willingly surrender their lives on its slopes. The more people die by love-suicide, the more this classic is dramatised. The more [the *dto-mba*] dramatise it, the more people cut short their lives. This situation has gotten out of hand. For the authorities, imposing an all-out ban on the recitation of these scriptures is the sole effective method [to reduce suicide] […].[42]
>
> When I first arrived in Lijiang in 1939, the ban was pretty much in force, and now old *dto-mba* priests do not dare to praise the beauty [of Naxi pictographs]. That's why they don't talk in public on the topic. This pertains, above all, to the songs of love-sui-

[41] More on the aesthetics and use of *k'a-kwuo-kwuo* to make somebody succumb to the lure of a love-death pact in Goullart 1957, 154-5, 182-3.

[42] *Har-la-llü-k'ö* was formally banned with the proclamation of the Republic of China (1912), and ever since 1949 *dto-mba* rituals have further declined (Jackson 1979, 74).

> cide. I had to talk with the priests privately, and hunt for a secret room for the purpose [of having them sing the songs]. […] The incredibly fervent depiction [of suicide] has an overpowering appeal on the listener to the extent that he lets himself be overtaken by a sentimental desire of death! […] If these admirable masterpieces can truly instil fascination with death into the mind of people, [authorities] should not only unloose the prohibitions but reward [their author] with a gold medal in literature and arts. It is the implementation of a government ban on [such pieces of art] that authenticates the beauty of *dto-mba* verses. (Li 2015, 296-7)

Suicide's melancholic identification with the natural landscape is another important aspect brought forth by Li in his field notes of republican Lijiang. As can be inferred from the extract below, the aesthetics of self-killing are reproduced, solidified, and perpetuated through and upon components of the biotic or abiotic environment, such as rocky gorges, clouds, trees, grass, flowers, and wildlife. The better the landscape, the stronger the urge to identify with it unto death.

> [My Naxi informant] once explained to me that the methods used in love-suicide are per se picturesque and poetic. Before killing themselves, boys and girls search for a gorgeous, inaccessible place in the mountains to hide themselves. They dress in their finest garments, prepare dry food and tasty wine, and take their most valuable jewelry with them. […] They enjoy their last days together in a very lavish way, drinking and singing. It is when there is nothing left to eat that they make themselves ready to die. First, they add oil on their lamps and light the wick to prevent wild animals from coming closer and devouring their corpses afterwards. Then, they take off the jewelry, put it around themselves, and swallow a poisonous substance or hang their necks to death. The most typical substance being consumed is the root of "black aconite". Sometimes they gather in large groups. The largest ever recorded was of ten couples, who are remembered as the "ten sisters". These rode their horses up to the Snow Mountain, enjoyed themselves for seven days or so and died of aconite intoxication. It was just because the horses had managed to escape that someone noticed the bodies. They were already long dead,[43] but it turned out to be

43 Russian-born explorer Peter Goullart (1901-78), a contemporary of Rock who lived in Lijiang between 1942-49, argued that, when death was sought by means other than aconite (i.e. stabbing with a knife, jumping from a cliff and other rudimentary less recommended methods), or when a lover was not brave enough to pursue the suicide pact till the end, there was "the possibility that one party of the pact might survive" and his or her body found badly wounded days afterwards (Goullart 1957, 152). When such thing happened and the person in question dared to go back to his or her home village, Rock

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> a lucky day for that someone. As folklore has it, whoever finds a pair of dead lovers is entitled to reclaim their belongings. The man made a small fortune out of it. […]
>
> [The informant kept saying]: "The spot [being chosen by these young fellows] has a full and breathtaking view!" [Having heard that], I could actually penetrate the mind of this group of ill-fated sisters, but unexpectedly I felt at ease with it. After we had further investigated on the spot, he lightly nodded his head and blurted out: "It is so beautiful in here, this place is worth dying!" (Yang 2000, 180-1)

The Jade Dragon Snow Mountain in YNAC represents the spiritual capital of the Naxi. At its foot stands the 3,240-metres-high Jinxiu Valley (lit. 'plain of spruce meadows') which is now a national 5A-level tourist attraction but in the not-so-distant past was one of the most preferred destinations of Naxi martyrs of love (Yang 2000, 179), who in taking their last breath identified themselves with a pair of deities dwelling on the peak. These are the originators and real controllers of *yu-vu*, Yu-ndzi-a-dzi and Gko-t'u-se-kwo, with the former portrayed as a bride-to-be possessing a fresh-faced beauty and a flower stuck in her hair, and the latter as a hawk-headed groom with black cheeks (Rock 1939, 13, 57). They amuse themselves playing the Jew's harp and the bamboo flute on the back of a red tiger, white deer or other mythical creatures. Trees and grass that creak and moan in the wind are heard as they sing, enticing young couples to submit their souls and join the two deities into the Kingdom of Suicides amid the clouds. In a few isolated yet recurring incidents recorded primarily between the 1950s and 1970s right in the middle of the Communist reforms that allegedly brought love-suicides to an end (Yang 2008, 12-16; Mathieu 2003, 232), several couples sadly lost their lives trying to be admitted within these celestial ranks, firm in the belief that once they got there they would never depart from one another and would be able to live in a paradisiacal state of unequalled delight and eternal youth. Other mystical localities with a strong relationship to suicide were peaks (Naxi *ngyu*), valleys or ravines (*k'a*), streams (*gyi*) and other components of the natural landscape, the names of which can be rendered in glosses as colourful as: "the spur where martyrs dance with roaring tigers", "the pass whence the spirits call the wind" (*hăr-lĕr-gkv*), "the place dwelled in by the playful lovers who hear the white cranes cry", "the highest summit amid the clouds where the spirits of suicide roam" (*llu-shwua-yu-gkaw-la*), or "the place of wandering lovers who listen to the echo

clarified, "[he or she] would be tied up and beaten and, perhaps, even locked up in jail, and the whole village would be against [him or her]" (Rock 1939, 7).

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of the supreme mount". La-shi ch'ou-mäg, an alpine slope south of Lake Gkaw-nkaw, was also frequented by Naxi couples with suicide intents (Yang 2000, 187-8; Rock 1947, 253). Additionally, Rock tells of a manuscript that identifies five regional *yu-ts'u* queens – one at each compass point – who lead all the other demons (Rock 1939, 16-17).

Notwithstanding these sensualised depictions of the afterlife as an abode of pleasure rather than of escape or torment, not all Naxi suicides had a ritualistic substratum or were love-compelled. The suicide's imaginative interaction with legendary characters like K'a-mä-gyu-mi-gkyi and Nd zi-bö-yíi-lä-p'er provided structure for misfits, runaway lovers and unhappily paired couples – first of all those who experienced an unintended pregnancy – to voice a discontent with the too oppressive social norms and living conditions that would otherwise be unheard. This was all the more evident in poverty-stricken Lahu areas.

4.2 Case Study 2. The Lahu

Like their Naxi neighbours, the Lahu are a relatively small minority whose language belongs to the TB family and kinship system is fundamentally bilateral, with no formal distinctions between paternal and maternal relatives, and varying degrees of matrilineal, patrilineal or even non-lineal skewing (Du 2016, 248-9).[44] With an estimated population of about 750,000, they are concentrated in the remote southwestern corner of Yunnan (59%), but a sizeable presence is found also in the foothills of northern Myanmar (29%), Thailand (9%), Laos (2.3%) and Vietnam (0.7%) (Minahan 2014, 159; Walker 2003, 101-2). According to the 2020 census, over 485,000 Lahu live in the PRC and about half of them live in the Lancang 瀾滄 Lahu Autonomous County (LLAC), under the administration of the prefecture-level city of Pu'er 普洱 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020, tab. 25-19; State Ethnic Affairs Commission 2012). Although before the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949 suicides were indeed rare among the Lahu, they were far from being non-existent. The following choice of ethnographic and folkloric materials substantiates such claim, revealing that suicide was bound up with the turbulent history of this specific minority group, its sophisticated theistic cosmology, and with the gender-egalitarian organisation of its society.

44 Bilateral non-lineal kinship is a dynamic social organisation where, as expounded by Ma Jianxiong, "the relatives of a married couple are of parallel importance, [...] there is no internal hierarchy among the relatives and no family genealogy is recorded" (Ma 2011a, 495 fn. 1).

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4.2.1 Summary of the Major Social Determinants of Suicidal Behaviour

The Lahu first appeared in Qing official records as *luohei* 猓黑 (lit. 'black beasts') (Patterson Giersch 2006, 112-14). Their modern history is shaped by a prolonged struggle against poverty, ethnic oppression, resistance to external authority, and conflict-induced migration. Combined together, these provided fertile ground for sectarian insurgent movements, allowing political aspirations for a cross-border Lahu nationhood to be channelled through the secretive activities of village-based healers, militant Buddhist monks called *fu jaw maw* (Lahu 'Buddha kings'), and self-declared messiahs. The period from the mid-1720s to the first half of the twentieth century witnessed an almost unbroken cycle of minor isolated incidents which every now and then snowballed into an all-out military confrontation with both the Qing and Western colonial powers (Ma 2011b; Chen, Li 1986, 29-41; O'Morchoe 2020).

Singularly noteworthy for the nuanced insights on the aestheticisation and ritualisation of violence are a couple of examples documented in the work of Anthony Walker. The first example deals with a Lahu-led uprising that took place in 1903 in Shuangjiang 雙江 (present-day Lahu, Wa, Blang and Dai Autonomous County), where a holy man named Luo Zhabu 羅扎布 (Law Ca-bon, n.d.) staged a mass dancing-and-singing event aimed at mobilising his fellow villagers against the local authorities. Reportedly, Luo lured the participants into drinking charmed water so that they could gain invulnerability to firearm injuries, and subsequently got himself killed in the fighting (Walker 2003, 518-19). The second example pertains to a certain Ma Heh G'ui-sha' (lit. 'Supreme Being Ma Heh', n.d.) whose healing arts attracted many followers in bordering British-controlled Kengthung, Myanmar's Shan state. In March 1929, Ma and a group of rebels under his lead – also in this case protected by mystical charms – were able to seize a fortified citadel and defy Burmese police forces. Despite their modern weaponry, it took the police one month to reconquer the fort (*Report on the Police Administration of Burma* 1930, 91-2, cit. in Walker 2003, 521-2). In both cases, Lahu suicide ideals fed into religious understandings of martial honour, courage on the battlefield, and other forms of sanctioned violence. Beliefs in superhuman agency and messianic warriorship demonstrate how light-hearted the Lahu insurgents were in coping with impending death. These beliefs and the set of ritualised practices associated with them continued throughout the Great Leap Forward (1958-62) campaign and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), but this time it was the changed political climate rather than a growth in salience of said movements that exposed Lahu society to a historic rise in suicide rates.

Similar aesthetic devices as attested in love-pact suicides can be observed through the lenses of dance, antiphonal songs, and dating

habits that bear a strong resemblance to those of the Naxi. The Lahu new year, autumn harvesting and other annual gatherings with a strong religious flavour such as the Pine Torch Festival (celebrated from the 24th to the 28th day of the first month of the lunar calendar) were all good occasions for young Lahu to pour out their feelings and choose their partners. Tradition has it that weddings stemmed from this institutionalised season of courtship, which was also when suicides cropped up and prayers were offered to the ancestral spirits, culture heroes, and gods (Schrock et al. 1970, 373-4; Wang 2000, 780). Courtship used to be a collective activity, with boys and girls convening at night and camping around a fire. They danced and sang, flirting with each other until they found a suitable wife- or husband-to-be, and then climbed over the mountains exchanging love songs in groups of three to five each, matchmakers included. At times feelings were conveyed individually, with no need for middlemen to get involved. When accompanied by instruments, songs were played on the *ghengx* (harp similar to the Chinese *sheng* 笙),[45] but were mostly sung without accompaniment and always antiphonally, with male and female choirs alternating. In villages with a strong matrilineal identity, women strode around the field and sang to allure men. If courting failed to blossom into an official engagement because one of the two families or some *hk'a sheh* (Lahu 'village headmen') hinted disapproval, the young lovers had no other option than to escape up to the mountains and enact their suicidal plan there. If the elders agreed, the wedding was held a few days or weeks afterwards. Besides the objections of family and community elders, it is also the strict regulations on divorce, adultery and widow inheritance that are to be counted here as major risk factors leading to suicide (Chen, Li 1986, 69-70, 80-1; Lei, Liu 1999, 81-3). To validate this claim is a compilation of case-studies on a few hamlets in LLAC during the 1960s and 1970s. Covering a large sample of people across all social strata, marital status, age, sex, education, and occupational background, the study reports that among those who sealed a suicide pact were both unmarried individuals and members of married couples with an outside lover. These ranged from farmers to white-collar workers, from ordinary public employees to grassroots ethnic cadres with an age comprised between 16 and 59 (Wang 2000, 782). Along with the wide-age spectrum and cross-class characterisation of love-suicides, the

45 It is a bamboo woodwind instrument made of multiple pipes fixed onto a small gourd which is used by the Lahu and many other southwestern minorities of the Hmong-mien language family as accompaniment to dances and singing during festivals. As with the Naxi three-strip harp (Naxi *gue gueq*), the Lahu reed pipe is well known for its role in courtship. Lovers would play it to voice their emotion, engage in love-making, and charm each other into carrying their love-vow to death (see the story of Cal Thid and Na Vawl cited in § 4.2.3).

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most noticeable thing revealed by this and more up-to-date research on the topic is the virtual absence of gender imbalance.

Du Shanshan has found that, over the last century, with love-suicide pacts being quite an oddity before 1949 and becoming the leading cause of suicide in the 1950s, Lahu society proved its egalitarianism also in the way people ended their lives. Based on Du's statistical evaluations of four village clusters, the suicide rate jumped from 3.9 per 100,000 of population between 1911 and 1949 to as high as 159.2 at the beginning of the Great Leap Forward, or 127.3 if one considers love-suicides alone. Among the reasons for a higher rate of love-suicides are the stringent restrictions on divorce, arranged marriage, punishment for those caught having an illicit relationship, and public shame. Despite the 1950s' sudden rise in the overall suicide rate, the average ratio of 85.0 (male) and 79.9 (female) suicides per 100,000 of population remained steady since 1910 (Du 2012, 117-19, 123). A more comprehensive appraisal of the intriguing facets of this phenomenon cannot be elicited without some general information on the indigenous worldview of the Lahu.

4.2.2 Life-Death Cycle(s) in Lahu Cosmology and Sentencing of Suicide Corpse as Post-Mortem Punishment

In its most traditional form, Lahu culture has often been envisaged by scholars as practicing a gender equality that is manifested at the social level – in the division of labour, kinship structure, and communal relations – but is also supported and augmented by cosmological principles (Du 2002). In the Lahu cosmographies, order at all levels is enforced and maintained by Xeul Sha (E Sha 厄莎), a genderless creator-divinity and primordial ancestor that combines male (E Ya 厄雅) and female (Sha Ya 莎雅) attributes into a dyadic all-encompassing and eternal unity. Legend has it that the first couple of humans – brother Zayi (Cal-tif, lit. 'the only-man') and sister Nayi (Natif, 'the only-woman') – came out of a gourd and, in order to populate the earth, was forced into an incestuous relationship. Couples were matched before birth, family surnames were assigned by Xeul Sha, and after marriage a couple became an unsplittable unity identified by the couple's name which so far remains much easier to be traced than the husband or wife's individual names.[46] The world of the living (Lahu *demumi*) and that of the dead (*simumi*) makes a pair too,

46 Za and Na are articles used before male and female names. Although there are little differences in Lahu names and the way the origin myth is told, presumably due to regional variations, Zayi and Nayi are normally regarded as the first generation of humans and by their union, eight sons and eight daughters were born. Not unlike the Naxi's case in section 4.1.1, incest taboos were upheld at one point, but in the Lahu's

and dying is seen as part of an endless cycle of soul transmigration from one world to the other, from a 'place of production' where young generations provide for their dead (grand)-parents and the immediate ancestors or family spirits (*yeshe*) to a supermundane one that is inhabited by the latter who act as spiritual guardians of the lineage (Ma 2013, 44, 56-8, 63-6, 77-8; Schipper, Ye, Yin 2011, 323-4; Wang, He 1999, 154, 178-80). Correspondingly, death is not to be feared for it represents just a means through which one can start a new life-cycle as a dead family member. The Lahu deathscape is best typified in a *maw-pa* ('shaman') chant titled *Sorrow Song to Escort the Spirits*,[47] a passage of which is given below.

> Xeul Sha's senior son [demigod Cal Nud] and daughter [Cal Pie] are fated to die | […] The same fate shall befall the living | In the place where they are going, life is at ease away from suffering.
>
> A person is like a single bamboo chopstick | That can pick up food only by working in pairs | Likewise, birds rest in couples on the top of trees | And boys and girls become one upon marriage | Their fate is decided the instant they were born | After they die they will be sent to the netherworld | They will break away with the living | And depart for the abode of the dead | When you will arrive there | Choose wisely your own place | Because only with a peaceful heart you can get along well | You don't have to miss the elderly and children of the family | You don't have to worry about family issues | If you fall asleep, don't dream of the living | Let your wishes determine the place for you to dwell in […]. (Lei, Liu 1999, 92-3)

The picture obtained from this passage is that god(s) dispense life and can take it away, that their human children are meant to stay together both in this world and the next, and that when they die they are to leave behind all the worldly trivialities that caused them pain during their lives. Filial and parental responsibilities are not excluded. Although it is not stated here whether self-killing as an escape from the hardships of life or as a romantic expedient to estranged family relations is condonable or not, in the Lahu belief system it is only the souls of people who died from natural causes that can eventually reunite with the ancestors. On the contrary, the souls of those who died of drowning, falling, labour complications, suicide, or injuries in hunting or other accidents are temporarily denied access to the world of the dead and required to transit first through a limbo-

case only bilateral cross-cousin marriage between sister's sons (FZS) and brother's daughters (MBD) was allowed.

47 The original title translates in Chinese as *Songgui aige* 送鬼哀歌.

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like territory known in Lahu as *jasljialuodu*, where they cannot join the other dead members of the lineage and wait for other souls to replace them (Ma 2013, 198). Because of this system of beliefs, the corpse of people falling into the above categories did not receive proper funerals and, in certain cases, was even left abandoned to rot in the wilderness – a practice which, in some small village communities across the Yunnan-Shan border, remained in place up until the 1970s. In any case, villagers did not bring the body of an abnormally deceased person back to the household, nor did they keep it within the village, for the spirit of such person was thought to become a dangerous wandering ghost (Lahu *me*) who harms the living, driving them to suicide or infecting them with unnamed diseases. Special soul-sending rituals were performed by *maw-pa* priests to escort the unwanted spectral presence to the world of the dead, and separate burial plots were also allotted to the human remains. The suicide's body was buried directly in the ground with no coffin, cloth wrap, or any burial item of value, while for all other kinds of violent death, the corpse was inhumed where the accident took place (Ma 2013, 198-9; Wang, He 1999, 168-70). The distinction between different types of burial and funerary rites, some of which functioned as punishments, gives reason to class suicide with morally proscribed acts.

4.2.3 Love-Suicide and Posthumous Piety in the *Beeswax Candles*

The picture becomes much more complex when one delves deeper into the intricacies of love-pact suicide. The story of Cal Thid and Na Vawl, who killed themselves to get married posthumously, as described in the heartbreaking *Beeswax Candles* (Chinese *Fengla deng* 蜂蜡灯), offers quite a different perspective. This 216-line long ode, belonging to the *Qameulkhawd* genre ('poem song' or 'ballad') popular in Lancang, can be divided into seven parts, including a very short prelude and epilogue. Here follows a few salient couplets that throw some light on how self-killing was problematised on both religious and moral grounds, and how the emotional distress caused by unsupportive parents was a mitigating factor that made it easier for people to empathise with suicides, justify their fatal act or even praise it as noble, pure, and valiant, just like it was for messianic warriors.

> Overture: The flowers of love | Bear the fruit of hatred | The velvet antler that is used as a tonic [for its medicinal properties] | Will become a poison that leads to certain death [...].
>
> Stanza I: One day, among the people from the mountain of the rising sun | A son was born as the sun rose | [God] Yad Phu named

him Cal Thid | His family was jumping for joy.
That day, among the people from the mountain of the setting sun | A girl was born as the sun set | [God] Nie Phu named her Na Vawl | Her family was jumping for joy.
On that very same day, Yad Phu and Nie Phu | Paid a visit to the world of the living | Indeed, both Cal Thid and Na Vawl | Were a sign from Xeul Sha. (Liu 1988, 182)

Stanza IV: The words coming out of [Cal Thid's] parents' mouth | Were as penetrating as ice-cold water | Cal Thid was possessed with intense passion | And filled with tears of grief and indignation, he uttered: | "I was meant to love Na Vawl the day I came to life | I will not change my heart even after death".
Neither were Na Vawl's parents | Favouring their marriage | They said that all of Cal Thid's kith and kin were black-hearted | And that fresh flowers should not be placed on cow dung.
Ice and snow hit the flower branches | Full of sorrow and broken heart, Na Vawl | Swore an oath before her parents | That she would only marry for the sake of love […]. (187-8)

Stanza V: Why those who love one another | Are always destined to a hapless fate? | Why do parents have to hurt the feelings of every couple in love? […]
Looking at her merciless father and mother | Na Vawl cried out tearfully: | "Keep forcing me into an arranged marriage | Will have no other effect than dragging me down to the grave".
Her father continued in the same tone: | "It's natural for bull horns to be bent | Since antiquity, parents are in charge of betrothing children | What choice do the young have left?"
Cal Thid and Na Vawl | Met at the sorrowful sound of *ghengx* | One note after another, the song accompanied | Two painful faces covered with tears.
Cal Thid shouted: | "We should leave now | Go far away from this land of misery | Let's go to the edges of the world. It is not this place alone that is abundant of water | Neither is it the only one where crops can grow | Like running water, we don't look back | We are clouds disappearing on the horizon, there we shall set up our new home" […]. (Liu 1988, 189-90)
[Narrating voice] My dear Cal Thid and Na Vawl | You can have happiness at the cost of your own life | [By consuming] the sinful plant of *Periploca forrestii*[48] | You will leave this world of pain behind.

48 Toxic plant grouped within the *Asclepiadaceae* family.

> Now that Cal Thid and Na Vawl have died a pitiful death | It is too late for their families to regret | There is no forced marriage that cannot separate a loving couple | Let them be together after death.
> My dear Cal Thid and Na Vawl, you underwent much suffering | You might finally rest on the banks of the Qingshui River | My dear Cal Thid and Na Vawl, you proved your loyalty to each other | You will be always united in the underworld of the nine springs.
>
> Epilogue: […] From then on, all young Lahu couples | Revere the memory of the two lovers | By lighting two candles | During their marriage.
> Oh candle | You are the symbol of free marriage | Oh candle | You represent the purest love. (190-2)

Of special interest is the fifth stanza, which recounts the hardship and family troubles that cause the young couple to consecrate their love through death. As resentment between the two families grows stronger, Cal Thid and Na Vawl are told that they cannot stay together any longer. Their dream of getting married suddenly vanishes. Having succumbed to desperation, they retreat to the mountains, where they decide to put an end to their suffering. Under a bright moonlight, Na Vawl wears her new wedding clothes, and Cal Thid expresses his deepest feelings by playing the *ghengx*. The two exchange one last intense hug, and after swallowing the poisonous roots of a milkweed plant sink into a timeless sleep amidst the woods.

In two of the concluding couplets, not excerpted above but discussed independently in the subsequent paragraph, the soil of a tiny hilly spot chosen by the lovers as a burial ground has born a beautiful *Murraia paniculata* tree attracting honeybees that, with their nectar, provide feed for the couple's mourning families. These couplets were often evoked by young Lahu fiancés who were about to be bond in marriage and lighted a pair of beeswax candles not just as a pledge of free love, but as an exhortation to other couples not to follow in Cal Thid and Na Vawl's footsteps as well as a reminder to themselves about the harmful side-effects a similar tragedy could have on parents, relatives and the community in its entirety. Another less prosaic version of the poem's epilogue allows for further reflections on this specific aspect which presents a stark contrast to both Han-Chinese and Naxi examples.

> If we cannot commemorate our wedding in this life, we will be left with no alternative but to return to the world of the dead and to do it there, so make sure that our bodies are buried together after we die. […] Our graveyard will be full of wild flowers, and colonies of bees will come by to collect pollen from them. When the new year begins, our parents will be filled with a sweet feeling

> of warmth deep into their heart. Yet they will still miss their son and daughter, and [the memory of them] will subside in a flood of tears. If only we were allowed to marry, what a happy and united family we could have been now. (Chen 2010, 87)

There is here an inherent contradiction between the unmarried lovers' moral obligation towards the family and the time-honoured motifs of indigenous courtship that calls into question the way suicide makes others feel guilty, the lovers' own guilt in enacting it, and the purported immorality of their actions. Such contradiction becomes more and more eye-catching when the bitter feeling of grief experienced by the parents at discovering that it is too late to repent is weighed against the sweet taste of honey made from the flowers of their children's grave. At the same time, "the lovers' own guilt over being unable to practice filial piety, which is highly valued in [Han-Chinese] society, is dispelled" (Du 1995, 214) through the very image of the buried bodies that fertilise the soil and supply nourishment to the elderly. This image greatly enhances the salience and aestheticised ethos of love-suicides: not only does it relieve the lovers of all their family and social responsibilities, but also clears them of any self-blame, guilt and moral affliction that might be connected to them. Furthermore, the belief that a low suicide rate translates into crop yield losses and "suicidal deaths make the soil more fertile" (Wang 2000, 788) might have helped bolster the perception amongst young Lahu that love-suicides more often than not bore long-term positive aftereffects, if not for themselves, at least for the community.

4.2.4 Making Sense of the Aestheticity of Death

Du's field research and interviews with survivors of love-pact suicides in 1980s' Lancang indicate that a non-negligible percentage of those who partook in secret singing sessions of love-suicide songs, either as performers or listeners, was more prone to develop suicidal thoughts. As Du herself pointed out,

> aesthetic experiences make love-pact suicides a compelling choice for many singers and even listeners. […] [S]ome of the enchanted listeners can be so moved that they accompany the singers in committing suicide because of […] deep sympathy for the lovers. (Du 1995, 204, 207)

This is, undoubtedly, the reason why with the Cultural Revolution coming to a close, in the then-people's commune of Fubang 富邦 there were tens of deaths per year with no less than two deaths in each instance, and a single session could involve as many as seven victims.

Consistent with the aesthetic construction of death as an uplifting experience was the conviction that lovers would be able to marry among the dead and live a prosperous life there (Wang 2000, 782-4). The many references to the world of the living as "a land of misery and suffering", to death as "the noblest form of love", and to the afterworld as a kingdom of unmatched abundance *de facto* contributed not simply to transforming what elsewhere would be a social stigma into an established tradition, but even to reinforcing the negative impact that cultural (mis)readings of death and dying might have on the youngest and most fragile members of society.

This Lahu tradition, when seen in light of the above, attests that the set of symbolic associations evoked by antiphonal singing, ritual courtship, and dance did play a decisive part in having love-suicide applauded in society, but it is not enough to explain the high incidence of death. That the Lahu of neighbouring countries – namely, the Na (Black), Nyi (Red), and She-leh sub-groups – were not keen to develop such tradition and other Lahu-heavy areas of Yunnan, like Menglian 孟連 (Dai, Lahu, and Wa Autonomous County) (Du 1995, 217-18 fnn. 3, 9), were instead open to it, proves that Lahu's suicidal behaviours were the by-product of sociopolitical pressures specific to their latter-day history in southwestern China. This argument is supported by Ma Jianxiong's findings on a few villages in the LLAC. In construing suicide less as a social institution than as a collective response to the collapse of the old household organisation and loss of ethnic subjectivity, Ma has concluded that suicide was available to the Lahu from time to time, but what spurred them on to take advantage of this course of action in the first decades after 1949 was a combination of the deepening penetration of state power in community matters, heated domestic conflicts (i.e. quarrels between husband and wife) and the Lahu's gradual exclusion from local politics. Those who in the radicalised years of the Cultural Revolution did not commit suicide ran away, with a peak of about 20,000 people fleeing to Myanmar in 1969 (Ma 2013, 188-9, 207-8). The comparatively effective village power structures, and higher degree of influence exerted by Lahu religious leaders over their fellowmen and women of northern Thailand, Myanmar, and other parts of Southeast Asia (Ma 2013, 197) are further demonstration that suicide was not a common feature of the Lahu *en masse*, and that aestheticised values of death have a tendency to take root under changed living conditions.

5 Conclusion

In the society(ies) of late imperial and early-to-mid twentieth century China, suicide and non-lethal self-injury possessed a distinct legal value in that the one who performed them was trying to repair the harm caused by a crime or serious breach of conventions. In this way, harming one's body became a quest for justice that empowered the victim, allowing him or her to appeal to the offender and the community at large, who were thereby held responsible for pushing him or her too far. This made self-harm a double-edged sword that could be used to convey either approbation of, or dissent from, the prevailing cultural norms. In the former case, the purpose was politically sanctioned (i.e. to dictate and sharpen people's conformity to norms), while in the latter it was socially disruptive (to galvanise discontent against any change in the norms). However contradictory, both practices found their *raison d'être* in a basic principle of morality – Confucian or other – under which they subsumed themselves and acquired legitimacy.

In China's traditional heartland as much as in the non-Han peripheries, suicide narratives were replete with sexualised associations inseparable from Confucian ideals of virtue, assertions of state power and outward political projections. In Ming-Qing times, self-killing was a key feature in the imperial state's toolkit to legitimise intervention in the local society(ies) and erode alternative sources of authority. Unlike the Han-Chinese élites of the southeast coast who upheld it as a symbol of civilisation and loyalty to the empire, the animistic Naxi and Lahu indigenous to the highlands of China-Myanmar borderlands, isolated as they were by geography as well as by their own language, customs, ritual protocols and repertoire of cultural practices resorted to it to resist centralised state control. In contrasting the suicide narratives of these few selected groups of people, their respective regional culture and normative statements on gender over the centuries leading up to the modern period, this paper has provided evidence that, whatever the outcome, self-killing retained culturally embedded notions of piety which were validated through gendered construction(s) of kinship, and social and cosmological orders. Regional variations and long-standing cultural differences in suicide patterns have been explained by focusing on marriage and family relations (i.e. husband-wife and parents-children). Special emphasis has been placed on Chinese-instituted patriarchy and the Confucian valuation of filiality that caused the less gender-restrictive Naxi and Lahu cultures to implode.

The exploration of the indigenes' free exchange of feelings in dancing-and-singing sessions or religious festivals and other bodily manifestations of affection shows incompatibility with Han-Chinese customs, which had women of wealthy families secluded from social life

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and their virtue cultivated in the inner chambers. The gender segregation and obsession with female chastity that underlie these customs clash with the vengeful feelings of abused women of the lowest classes, for whom suicide was a means to get back at those who had injured them and eventually rehabilitate themselves after death. They clash markedly also with the existing dating habits and alleged sexual promiscuousness of Naxi and Lahu people. With their belief system being turned upside down by the introduction of Han-Chinese standards of morality and parent-arranged betrothal, suicide took a heavy toll. It became an increasingly ceremonious affair that added new religious nuances to hoary tribal rules of honourable fighting and feud-settling.

While unravelling these nuances, the materials being referenced have cast new light on the role of imagined experiences in suicide narratives. The suicide's identification with legendary characters, ghosts, gods, and demons makes folk literature a fundamental source of information that must not be ignored when exploring the richly-textured grammar of Naxi and Lahu love-suicides. The melodic recitation of ritual texts, odes, and lore brought together emotions, cultural imaginary(ies), and music into a finely integrated multisensory experience of death that, as most notably captured in the verses of *The Romance of K'a-mä-gyu-mi-gkyi* and *Beeswax Candles*, caught the attention of easily malleable lovers who by entering into a suicide pact sought to romanticise their own deaths. This also applies to natural sceneries that facilitated imaginative identification with the said characters and otherworldly entities, and which further aestheticised death by recovering lost ideals of posthumous love and social justice that could hardly be attained in reality.

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